

THE ARCHITECTURE OF GRACE

— Book Three —



ROOM 36

*The Year of
Two Voices*

JAMES ANTHONY RAMSDEN

ROOM 36

The Year of Two Voices

BOOK THREE OF

The Architecture of Grace



James Anthony Ramsden

Architecture of Grace, LLC

Room 36 · The Year of Two Voices

Book Three of The Architecture of Grace

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A Note Before You Begin

The kids are twelve.

Most of them just turned twelve over the summer. A couple of them are still eleven, riding out the last weeks before the birthday. By June, when this book ends, most of them will be thirteen. The book is one year long. Seventh grade. Lincoln Park Middle School. The room is Room 36, on the second floor, and the teacher is Mr. Patel, who has been teaching seventh-grade English in this district for nineteen years and who has, in the last four of those years, been the cohort's most important adult outside of Ms. Calloway.

If you have read the earlier books, you know these kids. Marcus, Amara, Sofia, Priya, Darius, Jordan, Maya, Theo, Mia, Kezia. Ten of them. Nine in Lincoln Park; Mia in Pittsburgh since they were nine, on the phone, in letters, in occasional summer visits. The cohort has been a unit since first grade, when Ms. Calloway built the original room and the original Mistake Wall and the original three-sentence practice that some of them, even at twelve, still keep folded in their pockets.

If you have not read the earlier books, here is what you need to know. These kids are not unusual kids. They are not heroes. They are not prodigies. They are a class of nine — ten counting Mia — who happened to be put together in first grade with a teacher who decided, quietly, that the kind of room she ran would have certain shapes in it. A wall where you could pin a card about a mistake you had made. A morning circle where you said each other's names with the right

vowels. A practice, by third grade, of writing three sentences about what you had figured out, and keeping them. A practice, by fifth grade, of catching the small mean voice in your head when it showed up. The cohort has been in that kind of room for six years by the time this book opens. The room has shaped them. They have shaped the room.

Seventh grade is, in some real way, the year the room moves inside them.

In first and second grade, the room was a literal room. Ms. Calloway's classroom. The Mistake Wall on a particular wall in a particular hallway. The basket of stones for putting things down. Real physical objects. Real physical place.

By fourth and fifth grade, the room had started becoming a vocabulary. The cohort had been given language for things most kids never get language for. *Apology. Inner Critic. Putting it down. Forgiveness is not trust. The bench-sign.* The room was the words. The kids carried the words.

By seventh grade — by this book — the room is something different again. The room is interior. The room is the small architecture each of these kids is starting to build inside themselves. The Mistake Wall in Room 36's hallway is still there. The vocabulary the cohort knows is still there. But the work of seventh grade — and Mr. Patel and Ms. Calloway, in their separate ways, have been getting ready for this — the work of seventh grade is learning to be the cohort for yourself, in your own head, when none of the cohort is in the room.

That sounds abstract. It is, in fact, very concrete. Seventh grade is the year the Inner Critic gets louder. Seventh grade is the year a phone in your pocket starts running a kind of comparison that no human nervous system was designed to handle. Seventh grade is the year somebody hurts you in a way that you do not yet have any blueprint for. Seventh grade is

the year you start understanding that your friends — the ones you have loved since first grade — are also twelve, are also confused, are also occasionally going to disappoint you. The disappointment is new. The disappointment is part of the work.

The four-part architecture of this book is the same as the architecture of all the books in this series.

Part One asks: *who am I, really, when no one is watching?*

Part Two asks: *why is the voice in my head so mean to me — and how do I build a second voice?*

Part Three asks: *how do I stop carrying what someone else did to me?*

Part Four asks: *given everything I now know — what kind of person am I choosing to become?*

Identity. Self-compassion. Forgiveness. Grace.

That is the architecture.

This book is the interior book. Books One and Two were mostly about the cohort learning shared tools out loud, together, in a room with each other. This book is mostly about each kid in the cohort discovering that the tools have to come inside. That the work, by twelve, starts happening in private. That the cohort is still there — and the cohort is, in some ways, more important than ever — but the cohort cannot be in your head with you at 11:47 p.m. when the Inner Critic is loud. You have to learn, this year, how to be in your own head, by yourself, with the tools. That is what twelve is for.

I am going to be in the book more than I was in Book Four. Less than I was in Books One and Two. The voice ladder, if you have been reading along, has been getting quieter every book — more of the kids' voices, less of mine. In Book Three I am roughly equal with them. Some chapters are theirs, in close third or first person. Some chapters are mine, where I turn to

the camera and explain a tool or name a phenomenon they have been encountering. The mix is, I think, what twelve calls for. Twelve needs both — a witness from outside, and witnesses from inside.

A few small notes before you begin.

Mr. Patel is in this book in a way he has not been in any previous book. He is the cohort's main classroom teacher this year. Ms. Calloway is at the middle school too, in a different role — she has moved up with the cohort to become the SEL specialist for grades six through eight. She runs the Tuesday lunch block. She has the cohort weekly, in a small group, plus pop-in office visits. She is not in Room 36 every day. She is, in this book, the cohort's quieter background presence. Mr. Patel is the daily one.

Mia is in Pittsburgh. She has been there since the cohort was nine. She is in this book through letters, phone calls, one Christmas visit, and a long summer-end visit at the end of the year. Mia, in seventh grade, is doing her own version of the same work the cohort is doing in Lincoln Park. She is doing it without the cohort in her daily life. The book follows her at intervals.

The Mistake Wall is in the hallway outside Room 36. By the end of seventh grade, when the cohort leaves for high school, the Wall will go with them — Ms. Calloway will move it, the summer between seventh and eighth grade, to the eighth-grade hallway. The Wall has been with the cohort since first grade. The Wall will keep being with them. The cohort is the cohort.

You are about to read about a year in their lives.

The year is twelve.

The year is loud.

The year is when the second voice gets built.

– J.A.R.

PART ONE



Identity & The Weight of Perception

Who am I, really, when no one is watching?

September. October. The year begins.

CHAPTER ONE

The Mask & the Mirror

Amara has been at Lincoln Park Middle School for one year.

The cohort moved up together at the end of fifth grade — a new building, new teachers, new kids from two other elementary schools folded in. The cohort had walked in last August as a known unit, nine kids who already knew each other's names with the right vowels.

By the end of sixth grade, Amara had made friends, of a kind, with two girls from the other elementary schools. Brielle and Cassidy. The kind of friends you would call friends but who you would not, in any precise sense, call cohort. They sat with Amara at lunch sometimes. They had her over for one birthday party. They had been, more or less, the adjacent people in Amara's life all year.

Adjacent.

That was the word Amara had been finding for it, this past summer, in her journal.

Adjacent was the word for the version of herself she had been around Brielle and Cassidy — the slightly modified Amara who agreed with Brielle's opinions about the seventh-grade boys, who pretended to know the songs Cassidy played in the car, who laughed at jokes she did not really think were funny because the laughing was easier than not-laughing. Adjacent was the word for the Amara who, when somebody at Brielle's

house had said something a little mean about a girl named Hannah in the year above them, had not said anything.

Now she had the word. The word was uncomfortable.

The word was uncomfortable because Amara had spent six years with the cohort being not adjacent. The cohort had been the room where Amara was Amara. Three syllables. The soft *a* at the end, the way her grandmother said it on Sunday afternoons. The version of herself that designed the bench-sign in third grade. The version that, in fifth grade, had been the kid the cohort knew would notice when somebody was missing from the lunch table.

That Amara had not gone away in sixth grade. That Amara was still there. The cohort still got that Amara every day at lunch.

But Brielle and Cassidy got adjacent Amara. And adjacent Amara had been, gradually across sixth grade, taking up more of the day than cohort Amara. Most days had more Brielle-and-Cassidy hours in them than cohort hours, because the cohort was scattered across different sections of different classes and the only fully cohort time was lunch.

By the end of sixth grade, Amara had — and she wrote this in her journal, in pencil, in July — *lost track of which Amara was the real one.*

She had stared at that sentence in her journal for a long time. She had put the journal under her mattress, not because anyone in her house would read it, but because she did not want to read it again herself.



This is what nobody tells you about the Mask.

The Mask is not always lying.

The Mask is sometimes just being a kid in a new room with new people and reading the room and adapting to it. That is not a moral failure. That is how human beings have survived since we lived in caves. *Read the room. Adapt. Do not get eaten.*

The problem is not the Mask. The problem is when the Mask becomes so habitual that you lose contact with what is underneath — when every choice gets routed through *what will keep me safe in this room* before it touches *what is actually true about me*. The problem is when the Mirror gets so dusty you cannot see yourself in it anymore.

Amara, on the first day of seventh grade, was about to figure out that this was going to be the year of the Mirror.

She did not know that yet on the morning of the first day. She was, on the morning of the first day, just trying to find Room 36.



Room 36 was on the second floor of the middle school, in the corner of the seventh-grade hallway. The Mistake Wall, over the summer, had been moved from sixth-grade hallway to seventh — Ms. Calloway had done it the second week of August, by herself, in the afternoons, while the building was still mostly empty.

The Wall, when Amara walked past it that morning, had eight cards on it already. Seven of them she recognized from last year, in different cohort kids' handwriting. The eighth was new — a card by somebody she did not know. The card said *I forgot to feed my hamster for three days*. The card was unsigned. It had been, Amara guessed, written by one of the sixth-graders who was now a seventh-grader, who had walked past the Wall on their orientation visit last week and had wanted to start the year right.

Amara stopped at the Wall for a second.

She did not write a card. She did not need to. She just looked.

The Wall was the cohort's most public artifact. The cohort had inherited it and carried it. The cohort had also — and Amara knew this without anyone saying it — protected it. Last year a seventh-grader had taken a card off the Wall as a joke and the cohort had, collectively and without any organizing meeting, gotten the card back and put it back up within thirty-six hours. The Wall did not, in their building, get messed with.

She walked into Room 36.

Mr. Patel was at the front.

She had not been in a classroom with Mr. Patel since fifth grade, when he had been the cohort's main teacher for a year. He had then moved up to seventh grade. The cohort had not seen him much in sixth grade — they had been in different classrooms, with different teachers. Now, on the first day of seventh grade, here he was again.

Mr. Patel had aged a little. He had a small gray streak in the front of his hair that had not been there in fifth grade. He was wearing a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up — same as fifth grade. He had the same coffee mug on his desk, a gift from a previous cohort, with a picture of a small cartoon owl wearing glasses.

He looked up.

He saw the first cohort kids walking in. Theo came in just before Amara. Marcus came in just after. Priya was already at her desk, having gotten to school early because Priya was Priya.

Mr. Patel said, *Marcus. Theo. Priya. Amara. You four. And — let me see — Maya and Jordan in second period, Sofia and*

Darius in fourth, Kezia in fifth. The schedule got you scattered. I have all of you across the day.

Theo said, Mr. Patel. *You memorized our schedules?*

Mr. Patel said, Theo. *I have been thinking about this cohort all summer. Of course I memorized the schedules.*

Marcus said, Mr. Patel. *Welcome back.*

Mr. Patel said, Marcus. *Thank you. I have missed you all. Take your seats.*

Amara took a seat. She looked around.

The room had the U-shape desks Mr. Patel always used. Twenty-three students. Most of them she recognized from the grade. A few were faces she only sort of knew. The cohort, in this first period, was four of them — Marcus, Theo, Priya, Amara. Five of the other nineteen kids were going to be people the cohort would have to figure out how to be in a room with, daily, for nine months.

One of them was a girl Amara did not really know, sitting two seats down, with her phone out under the desk. Amara recognized the girl's face but did not know her name. The girl had been in Amara's sixth-grade math class. The girl had not, all of last year, said two words to Amara.

The girl, this morning, looked up from her phone and made eye contact with Amara. She gave Amara a small smile. Amara smiled back.

The girl said, very quietly, *did you do the summer reading?*

Amara said, yes.

Was it bad?

No, *actually. It was — it was good.*

Thank god. Cassidy said it was bad. I trusted her.

Amara's stomach did a small thing.

She had not seen Brielle or Cassidy yet today. She did not know what section they were in. She did not, exactly, know

how she was going to be around them today, or this week, or this year.

The girl said, *I'm Maddie, by the way.*

I'm Amara.

I know. I had you in math last year. You were the kid who sat in the third row and never said anything.

Amara said — and this came out before she could stop it — *that was the sixth-grade version of me.*

Maddie laughed.

What's the seventh-grade version going to be?

I am — I am still figuring it out.

Cool. Tell me when you know.

Mr. Patel cleared his throat at the front of the room.

The class settled.

Mr. Patel said, *good morning. I am Mr. Patel. Most of you know me. Some of you do not. I will introduce myself properly in a minute. First, though, I want to do something a little different.*

He picked up a marker. He walked to the board. He wrote, in his familiar handwriting:

WHO ARE YOU GOING TO BE THIS YEAR?

He turned around.

That is not a question I want you to answer out loud. I want you to take five minutes. I want you to sit with it. I want you to write down — for yourself, in your notebook, no one else is going to read it — one sentence that answers it. Or a starting attempt at answering it. Or a question about the question. Or a drawing, if you are Maya, who is not in this section but who I will see in second period and who I already know is going to draw rather than write.

Marcus laughed.

Mr. Patel said, *five minutes. Start.*

The class wrote.

Amara opened her notebook. She thought, for a second, about *adjacent*. She thought about Maddie's question. What's the seventh-grade version going to be?

She wrote:

The seventh-grade version of me is going to be Amara. Three syllables. The cohort version. Not the adjacent version. I am going to try, this year, to make adjacent smaller and Amara bigger, in every room I am in. I am going to make the Mirror less dusty.

She read it.

She felt a small steadying. The sentence was not, in any sense, true yet. The sentence was a commitment. The sentence was what Mr. Patel had asked for. A starting attempt at an answer.

She closed the notebook. She looked up.

Maddie, two seats down, had also closed her notebook. Maddie was looking at her phone again. Maddie made eye contact with Amara for a second and gave the small *I am also writing things I do not understand* shrug.

Amara nodded back.

Mr. Patel said, *good. Most of you have written something. Some of you have written nothing. Both are fine. We are going to come back to that sentence many times this year. I want you to know – this is the year we figure out who you are when no one is watching. That is the work. That is what Room 36 is for.*

He paused.

Welcome.

The class said, in various volumes, *thank you, Mr. Patel.*

The year began.

CHAPTER TWO

The Funny Mask, Now in Middle School

Jordan, two floors up, in second period social studies, is crushing it about the wives of Henry the Eighth.

He has a routine he has been working on for two weeks. The routine involves a very bad British accent and a running commentary on Henry's marital history. The class is laughing. Mrs. Tomlin, the social studies teacher, is trying not to laugh, which means Jordan has won. Mrs. Tomlin laughing means the routine is okay. Mrs. Tomlin trying not to laugh and failing means the routine is a hit.

The routine is a hit.

It is the first day of seventh grade. Jordan, by 9:14 a.m., has already, in some real way, established himself in this room. The room — twenty-eight seventh-graders, most of whom did not have Jordan as a classmate last year — now knows what Jordan is. The room knows that Jordan is the funny kid. The room has filed him.

The cohort would, if you asked them, tell you several things about Jordan that the room does not yet know.

The cohort would tell you that Jordan reads philosophy under his bed. A copy of *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius with the cover half torn off, which his older cousin gave him in fifth grade. A book called *Letters from a Stoic* that he reads three

pages of every night. The cohort would tell you that Jordan cried at a documentary about a baby elephant in March, alone in his living room, and that he has never told anyone outside the cohort about the elephant.

The cohort would tell you that Jordan, by twelve, has been working with Dr. Pam Mendel, his therapist, for two years on what Dr. Pam calls *the load-bearing funny*. Dr. Pam has been gently asking Jordan, since fifth grade, whether the funny is one thing he does or the only thing he does. In the cohort, by sixth grade, the funny had become — increasingly — one thing, not the only thing. The cohort had let Jordan be funny and also other things. The cohort had read books with him. The cohort had asked him questions and let him answer with non-jokes. The funny had become, in the cohort room, less load-bearing.

The trouble — and this is the thing Dr. Pam has been preparing Jordan for, in their summer sessions, every two weeks — is that seventh grade has new rooms.

The room in second period social studies is a new room. Mrs. Tomlin is a new teacher. Twenty-three of the twenty-eight kids in this room are not in the cohort.

The funny, in this room, is doing what it did in third grade — making a place for him. The room, by the end of the period, has decided who Jordan is. The room has decided fast. The room has decided based on the British accent routine.

The funny is, in second period social studies, load-bearing again.



This is what nobody tells you about identity foreclosure.

That phrase — *identity foreclosure* — is a real psychological term. It comes from a man named James Marcia, who studied

adolescents in the 1960s. It means you decided who you were going to be so early — sometimes by ten, sometimes by twelve — that you never got around to questioning whether the decision was actually yours, or whether it was just the first available costume, taken in a hurry, while everyone was watching.

Jordan does not know this term yet. He will, by Christmas. Dr. Pam will teach it to him in a Tuesday session in late November. Jordan will, after that session, sit in his bedroom and stare at the word for a long time, because the word is going to put a name on a thing he has been doing for seven years.

But on this first day, in second period, Jordan does not have the word. He has the routine. The routine is working. The routine is, in the moment, his entire strategy.

Here is the thing the Mask gives Jordan, and the thing the Mask costs Jordan, in two columns.

The Mask gives him a seat at every table. A place in every group photo. The easy social currency of being the kid who can make anyone laugh. A buffer between him and any room he walks into. A way to disappear into his own performance.

The Mask costs him the chance to ever, in a new room, say the sentence *I think I might want to be a writer* out loud. Because the writer-Jordan does not fit in the room the Mask has just built. Because the room, ten minutes from now, will be unable to hear writer-Jordan when he tries to talk. The room has already decided who Jordan is. The decision is sticky.

These are real costs.

These are the costs Dr. Pam has been helping Jordan see.

The costs do not go away because you can see them. The costs are also not — and this is the important part — the costs are also not the whole story. The Mask is not all bad. The Mask

is, for many twelve-year-olds, a survival tool that does in fact work. Jordan survives middle school in part because the Mask is doing its job. The Mask makes the daily friction of being a new kid in a new room much smaller. The Mask is, in some real way, a kindness Jordan is doing for himself.

The work — and Dr. Pam has been telling him this — is not *take off the Mask*. The work is *know that the Mask is a Mask*. The work is to be able to say, in your own head, *I am wearing this right now. I am wearing it on purpose. I know it is a Mask. I know I am also other things underneath*.

The knowing is the work.

The taking-off is a much later step. Some kids do not get to that step until college. Some kids never get to it. The cost of never getting to it is high, but the cost is paid in private, and most adults are paying it without noticing they are paying it.

Jordan, at twelve, is one of the kids in the world who knows the Mask is a Mask. That is — and we should say this — not nothing. That is one of the gifts of being in the cohort. The cohort has, between Ms. Calloway and Mr. Patel and the rest of the kids, given Jordan the language for what he is wearing.

Jordan, in second period, is wearing the Mask on purpose.

Jordan, in fourth period English with Mr. Patel, is not.

The cohort will see fourth-period Jordan today. The cohort will see fourth-period Jordan most days. Mr. Patel's room is, for Jordan and for several of the others, the room where you can take it off. That is part of why the cohort has been the cohort. That is part of why Ms. Calloway built what she built.

Most kids — and this is the thing the cohort does not yet fully realize — most kids do not have a Room 36. Most kids have only second-period social studies. The Mask, for most kids, is on all day, in every room, because no room has been

built that gives them permission to take it off. Jordan has two rooms. Most of his classmates have one.

That is, in some real way, a kind of luck.

The luck is the cohort. The luck is Mr. Patel. The luck is the architecture.

He does the Henry the Eighth bit. The class laughs. Mrs. Tomlin almost laughs. The Mask is doing its work. Underneath, the writer-Jordan, who will at the end of this book be carrying a fifty-page notebook of his own short stories that he has not shown anyone outside the cohort, is also there. Both Jordans are real. Both Jordans are in second-period social studies.

The Mask is on. The writer is underneath.

Jordan, by Christmas, will have a word for what he is doing. For now, he has the routine.

He finishes. The class laughs. The bell rings. He walks to third period.

CHAPTER THREE

The Digital Backpack

Kezia's Instagram, by the third week of September, has three hundred and twelve posts.

The number is precise. Kezia knows this number because Kezia, last spring, sat down and counted them. The count was, she now realizes, a small alarm system she had been building for herself without naming it. She had counted, last spring, because some part of her had been wondering whether the number was getting too big.

The feed is — and there is no other word for it — immaculate. A consistent color palette, beige and cream. Sun on her face in every other photo. A coffee shop in one. A friend's birthday in another. A captioned shot of a book she has not actually read, propped against a candle. Her grandmother in a holiday post — caption: *the woman who made me, my heart*. Her highlight reels are organized by season. Summer 23. Fall 23. Winter 23. Each one a montage of light and friends and food.

What Kezia's Instagram does not show:

The fact that her parents have been getting a divorce for the last fourteen months, depending on which day of the week it is. The fact that her grandmother — *the woman who made me* — has the early stages of dementia, and on the day Kezia took that captioned photo she had spent forty-five minutes that morning explaining to her grandmother who she was,

four times, and her grandmother had asked her on the third try if she was the housekeeper. The fact that Kezia, on most nights, lies in her bed at eleven and scrolls until twelve-thirty, and that the scrolling does not make her feel better, and that she keeps doing it anyway.

Kezia carries one backpack to school. It has a binder, a charger, lip balm, a granola bar she will not eat.

Kezia carries another backpack on her phone. That one contains the entire performance of a life she does not currently have. That backpack weighs significantly more.

The cohort knows about pieces of this. Sofia knows about the divorce. Amara knows about the grandmother. Marcus knows that Kezia has been quiet at lunch the last few weeks, and Marcus, who has been the cohort's most attentive watcher of Kezia since first grade, has been waiting for her to tell him more. The cohort knows pieces.

The cohort does not yet know about the phone.

The phone, for Kezia, is a private thing. The phone is the place she goes when the cohort is not around. The phone is the place where the curated Kezia-on-Instagram lives, and the curated Kezia and the actual Kezia are, by the third week of September, far enough apart that Kezia has started — sometimes, at one in the morning — having trouble locating which one of them is her.

This is what nobody told her about the internet. The internet is an archive, not a moment. Everything stays. Your seventh-grade post is still your seventh-grade post when you are twenty-three. Every captioned photo of your grandmother is still there when your grandmother has stopped knowing your name. The performance accumulates. You are dragging it behind you, version after version, and it is heavy, and you did not sign up for the weight, and you cannot fully put it down

because the alternative — being seen as the girl who is not fine — feels worse than the carrying.

But the carrying is a real cost.

The carrying is its own backpack.



Marcus has a different version of the digital problem.

Marcus made one bad decision at the end of sixth grade. He had posted a screenshot of a private text exchange — somebody else's, not his — in the cohort's small text group, just to be funny. The screenshot had been of two kids from the cohort's grade, not in the cohort, having a slightly embarrassing conversation about a third kid. Marcus had not even meant to be mean. Marcus had thought the screenshot was funny because of a typo. He had sent it.

The cohort had laughed at the typo. Three minutes later, somebody in the cohort had said *Marcus, where did this screenshot come from* — and Marcus had realized, with the small immediate sinking feeling of a kid who has just figured out he made an error, that he had taken the screenshot off his sister Aaliyah's phone, which she had been showing him because she had been gossiping with a friend, which meant the screenshot had not been his to share.

The cohort, that day, had been the cohort. Sofia had said, *Marcus, you should probably delete that*. Marcus had deleted it within seven minutes. The cohort had also deleted it from their own phones. The cohort had not, anyone of them, screenshotted Marcus's screenshot to send anywhere else. The damage, in this case, had been contained. The cohort was the cohort. The cohort knew what to do.

But Marcus, since then — since June — has been thinking about the close call.

He has been thinking about what would have happened if the cohort had been a different cohort. If the cohort had been the kind of kids who screenshotted things and forwarded them. The original screenshot, once sent, had been out of his hands. The fact that the cohort had not forwarded it was not because Marcus had any control over them after he hit send. Most groups of twelve-year-olds, on most phones, would have forwarded it. The screenshot would have been on six other phones by lunch. The screenshot would have, by the end of the week, gotten to the two kids it was of.

Marcus has been thinking about this all summer.

He has been thinking — *I did the thing. The consequences just did not happen because the cohort caught me. If I had been in a different cohort, the consequences would have happened. The doing was the doing. The cohort just kept the doing from turning into the harm.*

That is — and Marcus did not have these words for it until Ms. Calloway, in their Tuesday lunch block at the start of seventh grade, named it — that is the difference between *what I did* and *what I got away with*.

Most people, most of the time, are not measured by what they do. They are measured by what they get away with. The cohort had let Marcus not get away with sending the screenshot in the deeper sense — Sofia's Marcus, *you should probably delete that* had been a small intervention that had landed before Marcus could do further damage. But Marcus still knew, in his own head, what he had done. The knowing was the part that was now living in his chest.

Marcus, in seventh grade, is being followed by a thing he did in June. The thing he did was small. The thing did not get out. The thing is still in his head.

This is what *I deleted it and it is gone* not being the same sentence looks like, in the version where deleting actually worked. The deleting worked. The internet, for once, did not have a long memory. Marcus's memory did. The internet has been kind to Marcus, in this one specific case. Marcus has not been kind to Marcus.



Here is what Kezia and Marcus have in common, even though they have not, this year, really talked one-on-one yet.

They are both being shaped, in private, by a thing they cannot fully control.

For Kezia, it is the gap between her digital backpack and her actual backpack — and the longer she carries them separately, the heavier both of them get.

For Marcus, it is a single three-minute decision he made in June that has now lived in his head for three months and is, in some real way, going to live there for the rest of the year until he figures out how to put it down.

Neither of them is a bad person. Neither of them is making decisions that are unrecognizable. They are doing what most twelve-year-olds and thirteen-year-olds do, which is build the only kind of self the digital environment has taught them is available — an audience self, an image self, a self in the eyes of others — and then carry the cost of it without quite understanding what the cost is, or where the bill comes due.

The bill comes due in private.

That is the thing.

That is why nobody talks about it.

If your digital presence was the only thing someone had to learn about you — if a stranger in five years opened your

phone and read every post and saw every photo and watched every story — would they know who you actually are?

Or would they meet a person who is not quite the person you are?

That gap is the digital backpack. We are all carrying one. Some of them are heavier than others. Some are getting heavier without us noticing.

You are allowed to put it down.

You are allowed, also, not to fill it in the first place.



There is a small thing happening with Marcus, this fall, that is the beginning of the putting-down.

Marcus, in the third week of September, walks to the Mistake Wall in the hallway outside Room 36, after school, when the building is mostly empty. He has a card and a pen. He stands in front of the Wall for maybe two minutes.

He writes.

The card says:

In June, I sent a screenshot of a private text that was not mine to send. The cohort caught me before it spread. The mistake was mine even though the spread didn't happen. I want to put it on the Wall because I want to remember that the mistake counted. — M.

He signs it M. He pins it.

He stands for another minute. He walks to his locker. He picks up his bag. He walks to the bus.

That is the entire scene.

The cohort, the next morning, will notice the card. Theo will notice it first because Theo notices everything. Theo will not say anything. Theo will, on the bus that afternoon, tell Marcus quietly that he saw it. Marcus will say *thanks*. Theo will

say Marcus. *The cohort caught you, but you also caught yourself. Both happened.* Marcus will say *Theo.* Thank you.

Mr. Patel will see the card at some point. Mr. Patel will not, that day or the next, say anything to Marcus about it. Mr. Patel will, three weeks later, when Marcus is in his classroom finishing a piece of writing, say very quietly, *Marcus, I saw your card. It is the kind of card I want every kid in this school to know they can write.* Thank you.

The card will stay on the Wall for the rest of the year.

This is what the digital backpack looks like, when it is put down. It does not look like deleting everything. It does not look like quitting the internet. It does not look like a big public announcement. It looks like a small piece of paper, in a hallway, written by a kid who did one thing wrong in June and who, in September, decided to be on the record about it. Privately. With his initial only. On a wall that the cohort built.

The Wall is in the hallway. The Wall is, in some real way, the antidote to the digital backpack. The Wall has rules. The Wall has shapes. The Wall is yours, but seen by everybody. The opposite of the internet, which is seen by everybody and yours to control. The Wall is the architecture for what putting it down looks like in middle school.

Marcus knew, when he walked to the Wall that afternoon, that he was using a tool. He did not name the tool. He just used it.

That is what tools are for.

Kezia, who has not yet used this particular tool for her particular backpack, will. Not in September. Probably not in October either. But she will.

The Wall is waiting.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Volume of Integrity

Sofia, in the fourth week of September, votes on something at a different lunch table.

Sofia has, until this year, only ever sat at one lunch table. The cohort lunch table. The lunch table the cohort has been sitting at since first grade. Last year — sixth grade — Sofia had, for the first time, started occasionally sitting at another lunch table. The other table was a group of girls Sofia had been getting to know in her honors science section. The girls — there were four of them — were not unkind. They were smart, fast, ambitious. They had asked Sofia, midway through sixth grade, if she wanted to sit with them on the days they had double science block and ate at the early lunch. Sofia, that year, had said yes some of the time.

This year, in seventh grade, the early-lunch arrangement had continued. Sofia, on Wednesdays and Fridays, sat at the science girls' table for the first half of lunch and then moved over to the cohort table when the cohort came in at the regular lunch. Twice a week, then, Sofia had a two-table lunch.

The two-table lunch was, until this Wednesday in late September, fine.

This Wednesday, the science girls began — and Sofia could not quite remember how it started — they began to make fun of a girl named Reese.

Reese was not at the table. Reese was, in fact, the girl who had been the fifth member of the science girls' group, until the start of the year. Reese had, over the summer, done something — Sofia did not know what, exactly — that the other four had decided was a betrayal. Reese had then been, by the second week of school, out. The four other girls had been, for two weeks, occasionally referencing Reese with the kind of light venom that twelve-year-old girls have a particular skill for.

This Wednesday, the venom escalated.

It started with someone — Sofia genuinely could not, afterward, remember which one — saying something about Reese's haircut. Reese had cut her hair short over the summer. The haircut had been, by the consensus of the table, *desperate*. A second girl had said something about the way Reese opened her milk carton, which was a thing Reese did with a specific motion that, until this Wednesday, no one had paid attention to. A third girl had said something Sofia did not quite catch but that involved an imitation of Reese's voice. The whole table laughed.

Sofia laughed once. The laugh came out before Sofia could catch it — somebody made an impression that was technically funny, and her face moved before her thinking caught up.

The mocking continued. Eleven minutes. Eleven full minutes of an absent twelve-year-old girl being slowly, carefully, dismantled by four other twelve-year-old girls.

Sofia did not say a word that contributed to it.

Sofia also did not say a word that stopped it.

Sofia laughed once.

When the cohort came in at the regular lunch, Sofia got up and moved tables and did not bring it up.

When she got home that afternoon, Sofia felt sick.

In her room, she did the thing she always does when she feels sick about something — she had a conversation with herself about why what happened was not a big deal. *I did not say anything. I am not the one who started it. I am not a bad person — I just did not do anything.* Then she went downstairs to dinner, and she was very quiet, and her mother asked if she was okay, and Sofia said *I am fine.*

She was not fine.

The thing she could not say out loud — not yet, not at twelve — was that *not doing anything* and *not participating* are not the same thing. The Mask of *I just did not do anything* is one of the most popular masks in middle school. It is also one of the easiest to take off, and one of the hardest to admit you are wearing.

If you sit at a lunch table where eleven minutes of cruelty are happening, and you laugh once, and you do not stand up, and you do not say *come on, that is enough* — you participated. Not as much as the people who started it. Not as much as the people who escalated. But you were a vote. The room counted it.

That does not make Sofia a bad person. The number of seventh-graders who are definitively, identifiably bad people is very small. That is not what we are talking about.

What we are talking about is integrity volume.



Integrity has a volume knob.

Most middle-school integrity runs on Volume Two. *I will not actively join in. I will not actively do harm.* Volume Two is fine. Volume Two is most of us. Volume Two is the *I am not the one who started it* defense.

What seventh grade is asking, gently, is whether you can — sometimes, when it counts — turn the knob up to Volume Five. Not Volume Ten. We are not asking for heroes. We are asking for one sentence. *Come on. That is enough. Let us just eat.* Six syllables. The smallest possible volume you can produce that still counts as a vote against the room.

Sofia did not turn the knob that day. Most of us, most days, do not turn the knob.

The point is not to feel terrible about that. The point is to notice you did not, and to ask yourself, before next time:

What is the smallest action I could take, with the least social risk, that would still count as the integrity response?

Sometimes it is the sentence above. Sometimes it is getting up to throw out your tray and changing the room's geometry. Sometimes it is the next-day text — *yesterday at lunch was rough, sorry I did not do more.* Sometimes it is just not laughing the second time, and meeting the absent person's chair across the table for one full second so the table feels — even if nobody can articulate it — *one person is no longer voting yes.*

That second is not nothing.

The volume of one second of withdrawn participation, in a room of eleven minutes of cruelty, is louder than you think.



Sofia, that night, did something she had not done in a long time. She called Mia.

Mia was in Pittsburgh. It was a Wednesday. Sofia and Mia normally talked on Sundays — they had, since they were nine, had a Sunday call habit that had varied in regularity but had never fully lapsed. A Wednesday call was unusual.

Mia picked up on the second ring.

Mia said, *Sof. Are you okay.*

Sofia said, *Mi. I did something today. Or — I did not do something today. I am trying to figure out which one is the right way to say it.*

Mia said, *tell me.*

Sofia told her.

She told her about the science girls' table. She told her about the eleven minutes. She told her about the one laugh. She told her about getting up and moving over to the cohort table without saying anything.

Mia listened.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, has been Sofia's outside listener for three years. The phone-call version of the cohort. The friend who is far enough away that telling her something does not have any social cost in Lincoln Park, and close enough — having been with Sofia from first grade through third — that she still knows Sofia in the bones-deep way that only the original cohort knows each other.

Mia said, when Sofia was done, *Sof. Two things.*

Sofia said, *yes.*

Mia said:

One. You are not a bad person. You are a person who was at a table during eleven minutes of cruelty and who, in the moment, did not have the script to interrupt it. The not-having-the-script is a thing twelve-year-olds do not have most of the time. The not-having-the-script is, in some real way, exactly what seventh grade is for. You are figuring out the script.

Two. You called me. That is the script working. Calling me is — Sof — calling me is the Volume Two version of the integrity response, after the fact. You are not pretending it did not happen. You are not telling yourself the lie. You are calling the person who can hear it, and you are saying out loud what you

wish you had done. That is — that is rehearsal. That is what people do before they get good at the live version.

Sofia cried a little. Quietly. Into the phone.

Mia waited.

Sofia said, Mi. Why are you in Pittsburgh.

Mia said, Sof. We have had this conversation. My dad's job is in Pittsburgh. We are in Pittsburgh.

Sofia said, I know. I know. I just — sometimes I wish you were down the street.

Mia said, I know.

They were both quiet for a second.

Mia said, Sof. Sunday call still on?

Sofia said, yes.

Mia said, and now we know we can also do Wednesday calls when something is up.

Sofia said, yes.

Mia said, I love you, Sof.

Sofia said, Mi. Love you.

She hung up.

She lay in bed for a while.

She wrote, in her journal, on a Wednesday night in late September:

Today at the science girls' table, four girls mocked Reese for eleven minutes and I laughed once and I did not say anything. Mia says the not-saying-anything was the script-not-having-arrived-yet. I think Mia is right. I am writing it down here so I can find the script before next time. The script I want is: come on. That is enough. Let us just eat. Six syllables. Volume Five. Not Volume Ten.

I am going to practice it in my head before bed every night until it is automatic. The way I practice math facts. The way I practiced piano scales in fifth grade. The script has to be in my

mouth before the moment, not after, or I will not be able to find it.

Practice. Practice. Practice.

She closed the journal. She slept.



A note about loyalty.

Loyalty is when you stand by your friends in something they are doing right.

Compliance is when you stand by your friends in something they are doing wrong.

These are very different things. They feel similar in the moment. They feel similar because we have been taught from kindergarten that being a good friend means agreeing with your friends, when the actual definition of being a good friend includes — sometimes, when it counts — disagreeing with them out loud.

The four girls at the science table were not Sofia's friends in the deepest sense. The cohort is Sofia's friends in the deepest sense. The four girls were a sort of adjacent friend group — the same word Amara used in her journal in July, about Brielle and Cassidy.

Adjacent friend groups, in middle school, are real. Adjacent friend groups can also, in middle school, sometimes ask things of you that your actual friends never would. When an adjacent friend group asks you to agree with something cruel, the asking is, in some real way, a test. The asking is the moment when the question is *this group my actual friend group, or is it adjacent* becomes answerable.

The actual friend group does not ask you to be cruel. The actual friend group might gossip, vent, complain — but the actual friend group does not, for eleven minutes, dismantle an

absent kid. The cohort, at the cohort table, does not do eleven-minute dismantles of absent kids.

The cohort has never done this. The cohort has been twelve years of not doing this.

Sofia, on Wednesday, was given new information about which table was which.

She is going to use the information.

She is not, going forward, going to fully exit the science girls' table — she has interests in common with them, she has a real friendship with one of them, the table is not entirely a place of cruelty — but she is going to start bringing the cohort version of herself to that table, on purpose, with the script in her mouth before lunch. Volume Five. Six syllables. The next time the table tries to mock Reese, Sofia will be ready.

The next time will come, by Mia's prediction, within two weeks. Sofia has two weeks to practice the script.

She is going to practice.

That is the work.

CHAPTER FIVE

Label & Author

In the fifth week of seventh grade, Mr. Patel handed Maya back a math quiz with a C-minus on it.

Maya was not in Mr. Patel's math class. Mr. Patel did not teach math. But Mr. Patel had been the teacher Maya had asked, in fifth grade, to look over her math homework when she was stuck — Mr. Patel had been good at it then, and the habit had carried — and so when Maya, last week, had walked into Room 36 during eighth-period free block looking distressed, Mr. Patel had said *Maya. Sit down. Show me.*

Maya had sat down.

She had taken the quiz out of her bag and put it on his desk. The quiz had a C-minus on it in red pen, with the teacher's note: *Maya — this is below your usual work. Office hours Tuesday if you want.*

Maya, looking at the quiz, had said quietly, *Mr. Patel. I think I am — I think I am losing it.*

Mr. Patel had said, *Maya. Sit down. Tell me what is going on.*

Maya had told him. The telling had taken a while.



Two years ago, in fifth grade, somebody at Lincoln Park Elementary had decided Maya was *the smart one*.

This had been meant kindly. It had been a label given to her by a previous teacher — not Mr. Patel — who had said it in

front of other teachers, who had mentioned it to Maya's parents at the conferences, who had said it back to Maya at the dinner table. Mrs. Phillips says *you are the smart one in the class, isn't that wonderful?* Maya, at ten years old, had said *thanks* and put her fork down and felt something she did not have a word for yet, which was the feeling of a label being lowered onto her shoulders like a heavy coat she had not asked for and did not know how to take off.

The Smart One.

For a year that label had been great. It had been great until the first time Maya did not understand something in class — and instead of just being a kid who did not understand something, which is what every other kid was, on a rotating schedule — she was *the smart one not understanding something*, which is a different kind of failure entirely. The label had made every wrong answer worse. The label had made every B feel like an F. The label, which had been designed as a compliment, had quietly become a cage.

By sixth grade, Maya was studying not to learn but to defend. By seventh grade, she had a stomachache before every test. And by this past Tuesday, when the seventh-grade math teacher handed back the quiz with the C-minus on it, the voice in Maya's head — the voice she had been hearing more and more lately, the voice that showed up to comment on every mistake — had said the thing it had been waiting to say since fifth grade:

If you are not the smart one, what are you?

She had told Mr. Patel this — not in those exact words, but close.

Mr. Patel had listened.

When she was done, Mr. Patel had said, *Maya. I want to draw something on a piece of paper for you. Can I?*

Maya had said yes.

Mr. Patel had taken a piece of paper. He had drawn a vertical line down the middle. He had written, on the left side, **LABEL**. On the right side, he had written **AUTHOR**.

He had said:

Maya. There is a difference between Label and Author. A label is what someone else writes on you, often before you can read. The smart one. The funny one. The athletic one. The shy one. The pretty one. The good one. You did not pick any of those. They were picked for you, by people who looked at you and made a guess and said the guess out loud. The label feels like a gift. The label is actually a prediction — a short, lazy, shorthand summary of who someone thinks you are based on a tiny slice of evidence — and when the prediction stops matching the data, you are the one who has to do the work of either living up to it or shedding it. Both are exhausting. One of them is actually possible.

He had paused.

The other side of the line is Author. The Author is who you say you are, written in your own hand, after you have thought about it. The Author is the thing you build for yourself, slowly, across years, as you figure out which of the labels were accurate and which were not, and which were yours to keep and which were yours to drop. The Author is the version of you that is being written by you, on purpose, in real time.

He had handed Maya the paper.

He had said:

Maya. The label that was put on you in fifth grade was the smart one. I do not know if you are the smart one. I do not actually have a way of measuring that, and neither did Mrs. Phillips. What I know is — you are a person who reads carefully, who pays attention to small things in stories that other kids

miss, who asks the kind of question after a chapter that makes me think about the chapter differently. I have known you since you were six. I have watched you read. I would not, if I were going to label you, label you the smart one. I would label you the careful reader. That is a different label. That is the label that fits your actual data.

But here is the thing. I do not get to label you either. Mrs. Phillips did not get to label you. You get to label you. That is what an Author is. The Author is the kid in seventh grade who looks at the label on the coat she has been wearing for two years and says this is not actually my coat. I am going to put it down. I am going to write a different label, in my own hand, on the inside of a coat I am going to grow into.

Maya had stared at the paper.

She had said, Mr. Patel. What if I cannot write a label yet?

Mr. Patel had said, Maya. Then you do not write one yet. You take off the old label, and you walk around with nothing on, and you wait. The waiting is part of it. The Author does not need to know the answer in seventh grade. The Author needs to know that the question is now hers to answer. That is — for now — the whole thing.

Maya had said okay.

Mr. Patel had said, Maya. One more thing.

Yes.

The C-minus. The math quiz. I want you to do something with it. Are you willing?

Yes.

I want you to write a card and put it on the Wall. The card can say whatever you want. I am not telling you what to write. I am suggesting that the C-minus is — in the deepest sense — a normal mistake, and the Wall is exactly the place for it. Most of

the cards on the Wall are about normal mistakes. The C-minus, on the Wall, will join its siblings.

She had thought about it.

She had said, Mr. Patel. *I do not want to sign it.*

He had said, *that is fine. Most of the cards are not signed. The Wall is yours to use however helps. Unsigned counts.*

She had said *okay.*

She had walked out of Room 36 with the paper Mr. Patel had drawn — the LABEL / AUTHOR paper — folded in her bag.

She had walked to the Wall.

She had picked up a card. She had written:

C-minus on the math quiz. I have been telling myself this is who I am now. It is just a math quiz.

She had pinned it up. She had stood for a second. She had walked to her locker.



This is what Label-and-Author looks like in seventh grade.

It does not look like a sudden self-reinvention. It does not look like *I am no longer the smart one, I am now the cool one.* That is just trading one label for another, which is not the work. The label is the genre. The label is the kind of thing the Author writes. Trading labels is not authoring; trading labels is just shopping.

Authoring looks like putting down the label, for a while, with nothing in its place, and being in the world without the label for some period of time, and seeing what shows up in the silence.

In Maya's case, what is going to show up in the silence — over the course of seventh grade — is that Maya is, in fact, an artist. Maya has been drawing since she was four. Maya has been drawing seriously since the basement studio her

grandmother let her set up in fourth grade. Maya, in seventh grade, has not yet thought of herself as an artist. She has thought of herself as the smart one who draws on the side. The label has been in front of the actual data.

When Maya puts down the label, in the C-minus moment in Mr. Patel's room, she does not yet know what is going to come up to fill the space. Over the course of the year, what is going to come up is the drawing. By June, Maya is going to be carrying her sketchbook with her every day. Maya is going to be drawing during fifth-period study hall, every day. Maya is going to have, by June, a folder of forty sketches that she is going to show Ms. Calloway during the Tuesday lunch block, and Ms. Calloway is going to say Maya. *These are good. These are really good. Have you shown your parents?* And Maya is going to say no, not yet, *I have not figured out how.*

The figuring-out-how is the work of high school. The figuring-out-that-she-is-an-artist is the work of seventh grade.

That work begins in Mr. Patel's room on a Tuesday afternoon, with a piece of paper that has a line down the middle and the words LABEL and AUTHOR on either side.

The paper is still in Maya's bag in June. Folded smaller than it started. A little worn at the edges. She takes it out sometimes, in private, when she is having a hard week.

That is what tools are for.



A note, to the kids reading this.

You have labels. Everyone does. *The smart one. The pretty one. The funny one. The lazy one. The dramatic one. The good one. The bad one. The forgotten one.* You did not pick any of

these. They were applied. You have been wearing them, in some cases, for years.

The labels are not necessarily wrong. Some of them are reasonably accurate. The kid who is good at math might, in fact, be good at math. But the label is not the whole truth. The label is a guess. The label is somebody else's first take, said out loud, and now you are walking around inside it.

You are old enough now to take off the labels, one at a time, and look at them.

Some of them you might keep. *The good listener* might fit. You might decide, after looking, that the good-listener label is one you want to keep wearing. That is fine.

Some of them you might put down. *The smart one* might not fit anymore. *The shy one* might not fit anymore. The data has changed. The label is from fifth grade. The Author who is writing now is in seventh.

Take them off, one at a time. Look at them.

The Author is whoever you are when the labels are on the floor.

You will not, at twelve, know the full answer to who is the Author. That is fine. The Author does not have to know the answer at twelve. The Author has to know that the question is hers.

That is enough for now.

Take off the labels. See what is underneath. Write the new ones in your own hand, in pencil, on the inside of a coat you are still growing into.

That is what seventh grade is for.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER SIX

Guilt & Shame

Darius said something to his little sister that he is, six weeks later, still carrying.

The sister's name is Imani. Imani is eight. Imani has been, since she was born, the small light of Darius's life — the kid in the family who has, by accident of being four years younger, gotten the version of Darius that Darius did not even know was there to give. Imani has been at every one of Darius's basketball games since she was old enough to sit through them. Imani has been, in some real way, the cohort's cohort-adjacent kid — she knows all the cohort's names, she has been at the cohort's basement gatherings on a few occasions because Darius has had to bring her along, she has, in the cohort group chat in past years, been mentioned more often than any other sibling because she was always doing something Darius wanted the cohort to know about.

Darius loves Imani.

That is not, in any way, in question.

What is in question — what has been, since the second week of school, in question — is whether the love is bigger than the thing Darius said on a Tuesday night in mid-September when he was tired and stressed and Imani had been bouncing a basketball in the kitchen while Darius was trying to do homework.

Darius had told her to stop. Imani had said *just one more minute*. Darius had said *Imani, stop*. Imani had bounced the ball one more time and the ball had hit the corner of the kitchen table and knocked over a glass of water onto Darius's open notebook, soaking three pages of math homework.

Darius had said — and the saying had come out of him before he had any awareness it was forming — *Imani, you are so annoying. You are so selfish. You are the worst thing about my life*.

The kitchen had gone silent.

Imani's face had done a thing Darius had never seen Imani's face do before.

Imani had set the basketball down very carefully and walked out of the kitchen and gone to her room and closed the door.

Darius had stood in the kitchen with the soaked homework.

He had said, after a minute, out loud to nobody, *what is wrong with me*.



There are two words for what Darius felt in the kitchen and in the six weeks since.

One of them is guilt. The other is shame. They are different words. They mean different things. Most people, most of the time, do not know they are different.

Guilt says: *I did something bad*. Guilt is about an action. Guilt is fixable. Guilt can be repaired — you can apologize, you can do the thing differently next time, you can put it down. Guilt is, in the deepest sense, useful. Guilt is the small alarm in your nervous system that tells you when you have, in fact, caused harm, and motivates you to repair the harm and try to do better. Guilt is one of the most underrated and useful emotions a human being has.

Shame says: *I am bad*. Shame is about the self. Shame is not fixable in the same way. Shame is a global verdict. Shame tells you that the bad thing you did is not just a thing you did — it is evidence of who you secretly really are. Shame does not motivate repair. Shame motivates hiding. Shame, when it is loud, makes you avoid the person you hurt, avoid the conversation that would fix it, avoid even thinking about the moment because the thinking is unbearable.

Guilt is the doorway out of harm. Shame is the doorway into more.

Darius, since the Tuesday night in mid-September, has been carrying shame. Not guilt. Or — to say it more precisely — Darius had a few minutes of guilt on Tuesday night, in the kitchen, with the soaked homework. The guilt had been clear and useful. *I should not have said that. I should apologize. I should clean up the water. I should let Imani know I did not mean it.*

By Wednesday morning, the guilt had been overtaken by shame. The shame had said: *you cannot apologize to her, because the apology will not undo what you said. You cannot pretend it did not happen, because she heard you. You also cannot really be the brother she thought you were, because the brother she thought you were would not have said those words. The words came out of you. They came from somewhere. They came from the real version of you, the one the cohort has not seen.*

That was the shame talking. The shame was lying. But the shame had been, by Wednesday, the louder voice in Darius's head.

Darius had not apologized.

He had not said anything to Imani for three days. Imani had not said anything to him.

By the weekend, the silence had become its own thing. Their mother had noticed. Their mother had said, gently, to Darius on Saturday morning, *is there something going on with you and Imani*. Darius had said *no*. Their mother had said *okay*, in the tone that meant *I am giving you the space to figure this out yourself, but I am also watching*.

Darius had not figured it out yet by the time he got to school on Monday. He had not figured it out by the time he sat in Mr. Patel's class on Wednesday. He had not figured it out by the time, three weeks in, he was still avoiding Imani at the dinner table — eating in his room, on most nights, with the door closed, claiming homework.

Three weeks of dinners eaten alone in his room. Three weeks of his mother letting it happen, because his mother had figured out, after the second week, that something more was going on than Darius was willing to say, and his mother had decided to give Darius the room to find his way back.

The cohort, on the days Darius was at school, did not know about this. Darius had not told anyone. Darius had been wearing a small version of the funny mask Jordan wears — Darius's version was not actually funny, Darius's version was *fine*. Darius had been telling everyone he was *fine*. Sofia had asked Darius, twice, if he was okay. Darius had said *yes*. Sofia had not, in the cohort way, pressed.

The cohort had, in some real way, trusted Darius's *I am fine*, because the cohort had been trained by Ms. Calloway over many years to trust each other's *I am fines* until the *I am fine* started cracking. Darius's was not yet cracking on the outside.

Inside, Darius was carrying a shame so large that, on most nights at eleven p.m. in his bedroom, he was lying in bed staring at the ceiling unable to put it down.



This is the cost of confusing guilt and shame.

Guilt would have walked Darius into Imani's room on Tuesday night, twenty minutes after the kitchen, and would have said *Imani. I am sorry. I did not mean what I said. The homework was not your fault. I love you. I should not have called you those names. Can I do anything to make it okay?* Imani would have, in some form, said yes – *I am still mad* – but yes. The conversation would have been short. The fight would have, by Wednesday morning, been mostly over.

Guilt is a doorway.

Shame closed the door.

Shame told Darius the apology would not work. Shame told Darius that even saying it would expose him as the kind of person who had to apologize, which would confirm that he was, in fact, the kind of person who had said the words in the first place. Shame told Darius that the only way to survive what he had done was to pretend, very hard, that he had not done it, which had required avoiding Imani, which had required eating in his room, which had required three weeks of slow growing distance between the brother and the sister who had, until Tuesday, been each other's people.

Shame had built a small wall, brick by brick, every day, for three weeks.

The wall was now real. The wall was going to keep getting taller until somebody – Darius, his mother, Imani, somebody – put a hand on a brick and started removing it.



Here is what is going to break the wall.

In late October, in the third week of the Guilt vs. Shame unit, Mr. Patel will assign a journal exercise. The exercise will say: *Write about a moment in the last six months when you said something or did something you wish you had not said or done. Describe it in detail. Then – and this is the harder part – write about the gap between what you did and who you are. Are they the same? Are they different? If different, where is the gap?*

Darius will sit at his desk in Room 36 and write, in pencil, about Tuesday night in mid-September.

He will not, at first, be able to write about the gap.

He will sit with the *what I did* paragraph for ten minutes, getting more and more uncomfortable, before he writes the second paragraph. The second paragraph, when he writes it, will be five sentences:

The thing I said is not who I am. The thing I said came out of me when I was tired and stressed and the water spilled on my homework. The thing I said was true in the moment in the sense that I was angry. The thing I said was not true in the bigger sense that Imani is, in fact, one of the most important people in my life. The gap is between the thirty seconds of anger and the eleven years of being her brother.

He will read what he wrote.

He will, for the first time since Tuesday night, breathe properly.

Mr. Patel will not read these journals – the assignment is private. But Mr. Patel will, after class, see Darius lingering at his desk and will say *Darius. Are you okay.*

Darius will say *Mr. Patel. I think – I think I have to go home and have a conversation.*

Mr. Patel will say *Darius. Go have it. The cohort will see you tomorrow.*

Darius will go home. He will knock on Imani's door. Imani will say *come in*. Darius will sit on the floor of Imani's room.

He will say, in a voice that is shaking a little, *Imani. Three weeks ago I said things to you that I should not have said. I have been avoiding you ever since because I have been too ashamed to say I was sorry. The avoiding has been worse than the original thing. I am sorry I said those things. I am also sorry I have been avoiding you. Both. I love you. The cohort knows me as somebody who is your brother. I want to be that person again.*

Imani will look at him for a long time.

Imani will say, *Darius, you are kind of dramatic.*

Darius will, despite himself, laugh.

Imani will say, *I am still mad at you. I am also – I am also kind of relieved. I have been thinking I did something wrong.*

Darius will start crying.

Imani will say *Darius. You are crying.*

Darius will say *yes*.

Imani will sit next to him on the floor. She will say, after a minute, *we are okay. But you have to actually come to dinner.*

Darius will say *I will*.

He will come to dinner that night.

Their mother, when she sees Darius at the table, will not say anything. She will, in the way mothers do, just put a plate in front of him and meet his eyes for one second and nod.

The wall will, by the end of dinner, be most of the way down. There will still be bricks. The fight will not, by one conversation, be fully gone. Darius will, over the next few weeks, do small repair work in small ways. He will help Imani with her homework one Saturday morning. He will let her pick the movie on a Friday night. He will, on a Tuesday in November, take her to get ice cream at Mason's after her basketball game.

The repair will be — and this is the important phrase, which Mr. Patel will teach the class formally in November — *acknowledge, repair, commit, move on*. Four steps. Darius will do all four. The fourth one — *move on* — will be the one he has been most afraid of, because he has confused moving on with forgetting it happened. They are different. Moving on means no longer making yourself and Imani pay daily for a thirty-second moment. Moving on does not mean the moment did not happen. The moment happened. The moment is on Darius's permanent record. The moment is also, by November, no longer running his and Imani's daily life.

That is the difference between guilt and shame.

Guilt does the four steps. Guilt finishes them. Guilt closes.

Shame skips the four steps and tries to skip the moment too. Shame keeps the moment open forever. Shame, if you let it, makes you carry it for the rest of your life.

Darius, at twelve, has been given the four steps by Mr. Patel. He is going to use them for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

What Room 36 Has Built So Far

In the last week of October, Mr. Patel did a thing.

The thing was simple. It took twenty minutes. The cohort, by the end of seventh grade, would look back on those twenty minutes as one of the most important pieces of Room 36.

Mr. Patel said, on a Thursday morning at second period:

Friends. We have been in this room for nine weeks. I want to do something. I want you to take twenty minutes and write a letter. The letter is from October-you to May-you. October-you is the person you are right now. May-you is the person you are going to be when this school year ends. I want October-you to tell May-you what October-you has been building these nine weeks. What you have figured out. What you are working on. What you want May-you to remember when things get hard.

He paused.

The letter is private. I am not going to read it. You are going to put it in an envelope. You are going to write your own name on the envelope. I am going to keep the envelopes in this drawer. He gestured to a drawer on his desk. In May, on the second-to-last day of school, I am going to give them back. You are going to read what October-you wrote. You are going to see what May-you thinks of October-you.

He paused again.

Some of you are going to write three sentences. Some of you are going to write three pages. Both are fine. Both are real. The

point is just that October-you and May-you, for the first time, get to see each other.

He handed out paper.

The cohort wrote.

Around the U-shape, the four cohort kids in second period — Marcus, Theo, Priya, Amara — wrote with the small focused energy of kids who had been given this kind of prompt before, in earlier years, by Ms. Calloway. They had been doing versions of letter-from-now-to-future-you since fourth grade.

The other kids in the room — Maddie included, plus the rest of the twenty-three seventh-graders Mr. Patel had — were doing this kind of letter for the first time in their lives.

Mr. Patel watched.

He had been doing this letter assignment, with seventh-graders, for nineteen years. He had seen, by now, what every kind of seventh-grader did when first given this assignment. He had seen the kids who wrote three sentences and stared at the wall. He had seen the kids who wrote three pages and could not stop. He had seen the kids who, halfway through, started crying quietly without knowing why.

He had seen, this year, what the cohort was doing, which was — and Mr. Patel could see this from the front of the room — what the cohort always did when given this kind of prompt. They wrote. They wrote like kids who had been taught that this kind of writing was real, who took it seriously, who knew that the future self would actually read it. They wrote in pencil. They wrote with their heads down.

He let the room go for twenty minutes.

At the end, he said, *fold the letters. Put them in the envelopes. Write your name. Bring them up.*

They did.

He put the envelopes in the drawer. He closed the drawer.

He said, *they are safe. May will come fast. Take a breath. The room will hold them.*

The bell rang ten minutes later.

The cohort walked out of Room 36.



Here is what was in the envelopes.

These are private letters. The kids do not show them to each other. The cohort does not, by tradition, talk about what is in their letters. The letters are between October-you and May-you. The cohort, having done versions of this exercise for years, knows the rule.

But you, the reader, get to see them. Because you have been promised a book, and the book is allowed to read over the kids' shoulders the way no actual person can.

Amara wrote:

October-Amara. *The thing you have been working on is the difference between adjacent-Amara and cohort-Amara. You have been writing about it in your journal. You have made adjacent-Amara smaller this fall than she was last spring. You have not made her gone. You still hang out with Brielle and Cassidy. You still do the small slightly-modified version of yourself around them. The goal is not to drop them. The goal is to bring more of cohort-Amara into the times you are with them. You are working on that. It is slow.*

May-Amara — *I hope you have, by May, gotten the cohort-Amara percentage to higher than fifty. Not all the way to a hundred. Just higher than fifty. That would be — that would be growth. — A.*

Marcus wrote:

October-Marcus. *You put a card on the Wall about the screenshot thing in September. You have been thinking about it*

less since. The cohort caught you. You also caught yourself. Both happened. The thing you want May-Marcus to know is that the Wall is for this. The Wall is the architecture for the things you cannot tell people verbally but can tell in writing in public. Use it again when you need it. — M.

Priya wrote:

October-Priya. The Inner Critic has been louder this fall than she has been in a while. The new school year, the new teachers, the new pressure — she has been finding new material. You have been catching her with the cohort's help. You are getting faster at the catching. You are also tired. The tiredness is real. May-Priya, I hope you are less tired. I hope you have figured out how to catch her with less effort. The energy is the thing. — P.

Theo wrote:

October-Theo. You have been noticing things in the hallways. You always do. You routed something to Ms. Calloway last week that you do not need to write down here. You did the routing well. May-Theo, I hope you are still noticing. I hope you have not gotten tired of the noticing. I hope you have remembered, as Ms. Calloway told you in fifth grade, that the noticing is supposed to be routed somewhere. Route it. Do not carry. — T.

Sofia wrote:

October-Sofia. You called Mia on a Wednesday in September because you laughed at a thing you should not have laughed at. The calling was the practice. The next time the table tries something like that, you are going to have the script in your mouth. Six syllables. Volume Five. May-Sofia, I hope you have, by May, used the script at least once for real. — S.

Maya wrote — and Maya did not write words, Maya drew. Maya drew a small drawing of a coat hanging on a hook, with the word LABEL on the front of the coat and the word AUTHOR on the inside, and a small figure underneath the coat

that was, recognizably, Maya. At the bottom Maya wrote one sentence: *I am still figuring out what is underneath.* — M.

Jordan wrote:

October-Jordan. Dr. Pam taught you a word in late September. The word is load-bearing. The funny mask has been load-bearing again in new rooms. You knew it would be. You are practicing leading conversations with questions instead of jokes. The practice is hard. The practice is making the conversations better. May-Jordan, I hope you have, by May, started writing your stories down in a notebook you actually keep. I hope you have shown one to one cohort kid. Just one. Marcus, probably. — J.

Darius wrote:

October-Darius. You said something to Imani in September. You avoided her for three weeks. Mr. Patel's exercise broke it open. You and Imani are okay now. The thing you want May-Darius to remember is that shame is not the same as guilt. Guilt walks you into the room. Shame keeps you out. Walk into the room. Always. — D.

Kezia wrote — and Kezia wrote less than anyone in the room. Kezia wrote two sentences.

October-Kezia. The phone is heavy. May-Kezia, I hope you have, by May, made it lighter. — K.

Mr. Patel, that night, did not read the letters. He had said he would not, and he did not. But Mr. Patel did, in his own journal at his kitchen table at home, write a small note about the cohort. He wrote:

The cohort, in October of seventh grade, is doing the work. They have walked into Room 36 with the toolkit Ms. Calloway built. They are now extending the toolkit into the interior. Each of them is, by my eye, in the middle of a private piece of work that the cohort knows about in pieces but does not fully see. That

is exactly what seventh grade is for. They are figuring out that the work, by twelve, becomes private. They are also — and this is the harder thing — figuring out that the cohort is still there, even when the work is private. The cohort has not gone away. The cohort has just changed shape. The cohort, in seventh grade, is the room they carry inside themselves. That is the room I am trying to build.

He closed the journal. He went to sleep.



This is the end of Part One.

The cohort, in October, has built — not built, exactly, but re-discovered — the floor. The floor of seventh grade is, in some real way, the same floor as the floor of every previous year. The Mask and the Mirror. The Mistake and the Wall. The Digital Backpack. The Volume of Integrity. The Label and the Author. The Guilt and the Shame. Six concepts. Six pieces of vocabulary. Six anchor points, in the language of Mr. Patel's classroom, on which the rest of the year is going to be built. The vocabulary is not new to the cohort. The cohort has had pieces of all six since first grade.

What is new is how the vocabulary is being used. The cohort is now using the vocabulary on themselves, in private, in their own heads. Not just in the room with each other. In their own bedrooms at night. In their own journals. In the small private conversations they are having with themselves at eleven p.m.

That is the interior turn.

That is what Book Three is about.

Part Two begins in November. The Inner Critic, who has been quieter for some of the cohort and louder for others, is about to get her own unit. The cohort is ready.

The cohort has been getting ready for this for six years.

PART TWO



Self-Compassion & The Internal Critic

*Can I be honest with myself without being
cruel to myself?*

November. December. The year turns inward.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Voice in Your Head

You have a voice in your head.

Not metaphorically. Literally. There is a voice that runs commentary on what you do, all day, every day, in your own internal monologue — and you have had it as long as you have had language, and it is one of the most consistent companions of your life, and most of you have never been told this voice has a name.

The name is the Internal Critic.

Yours might sound like your mother. Yours might sound like a teacher. Yours might sound like a coach who told you, in fourth grade, that you would never be a real athlete. Yours might sound like a kid who teased you so consistently in second grade that you internalized his voice and now use it on yourself in seventh grade — and he is not even in your life anymore, but his voice is, and it is delivering the commentary now, and that — when you actually think about it — is one of the strangest and saddest facts about being a person.

Mostly the voice goes unexamined. It just is, the way the weather just is. You make a mistake, the voice talks. You speak up in class and it comes out wrong, the voice talks. You catch yourself in the mirror, the voice talks. You scroll through your phone, the voice talks. You walk into the cafeteria, the voice — somewhere underneath the noise — is talking.

Mr. Patel, in the first week of November, gave the cohort a chair and a journal and seven minutes of silence and asked the question that most of them had never had asked of them before.

What does the voice in your head say, exactly? Write down the actual words.

The cohort wrote. Some fast. Some slow. The cohort had, in pieces over the years, been given language for this voice before — Ms. Calloway had named the Inner Critic for them in fourth grade, in a small way, and Priya had named hers in third grade in a bathroom stall — but Mr. Patel was asking them to do something specific. Not acknowledge the voice. Transcribe the voice. Write the actual words.

This is what they wrote. We will not show you everybody's. We will show you Priya's, because Priya, of all the cohort, has had the longest practice with the Inner Critic.

Priya wrote, in her notebook in Room 36, on a Tuesday in November:

The Critic says: you are stupid. You are slower than the kids in this honors class. You are pretending to belong here. You are going to be found out by Christmas. You should drop down to regular before the school figures out you cannot keep up.

The Critic says: you are weird. The lunch you brought today smells different. The kids at the science table noticed last week. They did not say anything but they noticed. They are going to start saying things.

The Critic says: you are exhausting. The cohort has been listening to you talk about the Critic since third grade. They are tired of you. They are not going to say so, because the cohort is the cohort, but they are tired. They want a Priya who is not always in some version of the same drama with herself.

The Critic says: you are not as good as Hannah. Hannah is naturally what you have to work to seem like. Hannah is the version of you that the world is going to want. You are going to spend your whole life pretending to be Hannah, badly.

She read what she had written.

She read it three times.

She looked up.

The cohort, around her, had also written. Marcus had written less. Theo had written about a paragraph. Amara had written half a page. None of them, in this exercise, was performing or curating — they were all just transcribing, in the privacy of their notebooks, the voice they had been hearing in their heads for years.

Mr. Patel said, *now read what you wrote. Slowly. Once.*

The cohort read.

Mr. Patel said, *now I want you to imagine, for one second, that a friend — your best friend, the one who knows you better than almost anyone — was sitting next to you, and you turned to them, and you said that to them. Out loud. In that voice. With that intensity.*

He paused.

You would not. You would not, in a million years, talk to your best friend the way you talk to yourself.

He paused again.

That gap is one of the most important gaps in this entire room. We are going to spend the rest of this unit in that gap. Because if you would not speak to a friend that way — would not, in fact, even let somebody else speak to your friend that way without intervening — then why, exactly, is it acceptable to speak to yourself that way?

The room was silent.

He said, the honest answer is that you did not choose the voice. It was installed. It came from somewhere — a person, a moment, a system, a culture — and you did not have a choice in the installation. But you are old enough now to ask whether you want to keep it running at the current volume. That is a real question. That is one of the questions of November.

He let the silence sit.

Then he said:

Tomorrow we will learn what the three tactics of the Critic are. Today, we just sat with the voice. Today was the noticing. That is enough for today.

The bell rang. The cohort walked out.

Priya, in the hallway, walked next to Marcus.

She said, Marcus.

He said, Pri.

Did you transcribe yours.

Yes.

Was it bad?

Pri. It was about what I figured it would be. The Critic in my head has been the Critic in my head for a long time. The transcription did not say anything new.

But seeing it in writing.

Yes. Seeing it in writing is different.

I know.

Pri. The cohort knows. The cohort has known since third grade. The Critic in your head is one of the longest-running members of our extended cast. You are not exhausting.

Marcus.

I know. The Critic says you are exhausting. The Critic is wrong. I am — I am the cohort. I am authorized to tell you what the Critic is wrong about.

She laughed.

He said, *come on. We are going to be late.*
They walked to fourth period.

CHAPTER NINE

The Three Tactics

The Critic uses three tricks. Three tactics. Three moves. Once you can name them, you can spot them, and once you can spot them, you have a chance.

Catastrophizing is the first.

Everything is ruined. This is the worst thing that has ever happened. My life is over.

You bombed one test, and the voice says you will never get into college. Your friend did not respond to a text in three hours, and the voice says she hates you now. A teacher gave you feedback, and the voice says you are going to be expelled. The catastrophizing critic is dramatic. It is also, almost always, wrong — and you can usually tell by the giveaway words: *always, never, the worst, ruined, over.*

Globalizing is the second.

I always fail. I never get it right. I am just bad at this.

The globalizing critic takes a single event and balloons it into a permanent identity. You forgot one homework assignment and you are the kind of person who forgets homework. You said the wrong thing to one friend and you are the kind of person who is awkward. Globalizing is what turns *I made a mistake* into *I am a mistake*. It is, more or less, the engine of shame — the one we met in Chapter Six.

Personalizing is the third.

Everything that went wrong is my fault.

The personalizing critic is convinced you are responsible for things you did not, in any reasonable sense, cause. Your parents are arguing — it must be because of you. Your friend is in a bad mood — it must be because of something you said. Your team lost — it must be because you were not focused enough on the bench. The personalizing critic is exhausting because it makes every single bad thing in the world an indictment of you, which is both grandiose (you are not in fact the cause of every bad thing) and self-destructive (you are not in fact responsible for fixing every bad thing).

Look at your own critic.

Listen, today, for one of those three tactics in the commentary it is running on your day.

You will hear it before lunch. I promise you that.



Now the alternative voice.

This is the new thing.

The Internal Critic has been talking to you for years. You have never had a counterpart. You have never had a second voice, an opposing voice, a check. That is why the Critic wins — there has been nobody in the room to argue.

The counterpart is called the Compassionate Witness.

The Compassionate Witness is not a cheerleader. The Compassionate Witness does not say *you are amazing, you are perfect, everything you do is great*. That voice is lying, and you know it, and you do not trust it — the cheerleader voice is just the Critic in a different costume. The cheerleader voice is the Critic that has decided to make you feel good in a way you cannot sustain, and the moment reality intrudes, the cheerleader collapses back into the Critic, and you are worse off than before.

The Compassionate Witness is also not the Critic in disguise. *Try harder. You should have known better. You need to be better than this.* That voice — the voice some adults call tough love — is just the Critic with a mission statement. The Critic with a mission statement is still the Critic, and the punishment underneath the encouragement is still the punishment.

The Compassionate Witness is something else entirely.

The Compassionate Witness is:

Honest. Fair. Kind. Without punishment.

It looks at what happened, accurately. It acknowledges the mistake. It acknowledges the disappointment. It does not pretend the thing did not happen, or that the thing does not matter. And then it says something like:

That was hard. You are allowed to be upset about it. You are going to figure out what to do next. You do not have to do it tonight. You are going to be okay.

That is the entire voice. Honest about what happened. Fair about whose responsibility it was. Kind to the person carrying it.

And here is the thing nobody tells you, the thing that often makes students writing the Compassionate Witness for the first time freeze with their pen above the page:

If you have never heard this voice, you do not know what it sounds like.

If the only voice you have ever heard about yourself is harsh — from family, from coaches, from yourself — then writing kindly to yourself feels like writing in a language you do not speak. Some kids cannot, on the first try, write a single sentence of Compassionate Witness. They sit with the pen, and their face does something complicated, and they say later

— when the teacher asks gently — *I do not know what that would sound like.*

That is okay.

It is, in fact, one of the most important pieces of information you can have. It tells you that this voice is new, and it has to be built, and the first sentence you write in it is going to feel weird, and it does not have to feel true yet. You are not writing what you currently believe. You are writing what you are going to learn to believe. The believing comes later. The writing comes first.

So write it. One sentence. About the mistake you made this week, or the moment you embarrassed yourself, or the thing you have been beating yourself up about for the last three days. Write what a Compassionate Witness would say.

Not a cheerleader. Not a critic.

Honest. Fair. Kind. Without punishment.

You can practice this. You can get better at it. Some of you will get good enough at it that, by the end of seventh grade, the Witness has started to talk back to the Critic on its own, without you having to consciously summon it. That is the long-term project. That is what we are building.

For now, the project is one sentence.

Write it.



A note about the cohort.

The cohort, this week in early November, is doing the Compassionate Witness exercise in Room 36. Each of them, in their own notebook, is writing a Compassionate Witness sentence to themselves about a thing they have been beating themselves up about.

Marcus writes one about the September screenshot.

Priya writes one about the *Critic-says-you-are-exhausting* line from her transcription.

Sofia writes one about the laugh at the science table.

Amara writes one about adjacent-Amara.

Maya writes one about the C-minus.

Darius writes one about Imani.

Theo writes one about a noticing he made in October that turned out to be wrong, that he has been embarrassed about ever since.

Jordan writes one about the funny mask being load-bearing in second period.

Kezia writes one about the phone.

We are not going to show you what they wrote. The Compassionate Witness sentences are private. They are private because — and Mr. Patel made this rule on the second day of the unit — you cannot fully write a Compassionate Witness sentence to yourself if you know anyone else might read it. The presence of an audience, even a sympathetic one, will subtly turn the Compassionate Witness back into a performance. The exercise is, in some real way, only itself if it is private. You writing to you. With no third party.

The kids wrote. The kids put the notebooks away. The kids walked to fourth period.

By the end of the week, eight of the nine cohort kids in the building — Mia, in Pittsburgh, was doing her own version of this work in her own seventh-grade classroom — eight of them had a Compassionate Witness sentence written down somewhere in their notebooks. Most of them had not, before this week, ever written one. Most of them had spent twelve years hearing the Critic without any counterpart. The counterpart had now been introduced.

The counterpart was small. The counterpart was, in most of their notebooks, one sentence. The counterpart was, in many of their bodies, still slightly hesitant — the Compassionate Witness was, for most of them, the language they were learning to speak.

But the counterpart was now there.

That was the work of November.

That was what Room 36 had built.

CHAPTER TEN

The Comparison Trap

Kezia is in bed at eleven-fifteen on a Wednesday night in mid-November, scrolling.

This is not unusual. She does this every night. She does this even though she has told herself, every night for the last six months, that tonight she will not do this. She has watched documentaries about phone addiction. She has read the *put your phone down* posts on the very platform she is currently scrolling. She has set a screen time limit that she has, three months running, learned to bypass.

What is on her screen tonight, in rapid succession: a girl in Los Angeles who appears to have a clear-skin routine that involves seven products and a sunrise hike; a girl her own age who is at a basketball game in a city Kezia has never been to, in a sweatshirt Kezia knows costs two hundred dollars, captioned *blessed*; a friend from school who is, apparently, in Aruba this week — Kezia did not know this — captioned *paradise*; a girl Kezia has never met who is twelve, runs a baking account, has nine hundred thousand followers, and has just posted a slow-motion video of a chocolate ganache being poured over a perfect cake while soft jazz plays in the background.

By eleven thirty-seven, Kezia has felt eight specific things in succession, and none of them is good.

The eight things, in order, are something like:

1. *Mild interest.*
2. *A faint stab of why don't I have that.*
3. *The decision to ignore the faint stab.*
4. *The faint stab again, slightly louder.*
5. *The thought am I behind?*
6. *The thought am I doing this wrong?*
7. *A specific, bottoming-out feeling that does not have a word, but lives somewhere between exhausted and invisible.*
8. *The decision to keep scrolling.*

This is the Comparison Trap.

It is one of the great injustices of being a twelve-year-old in this particular decade. Comparison has always existed. Adolescents have always compared themselves to other adolescents. The new thing — the thing that is novel, in human history — is that the comparison set is now infinite. You are no longer comparing yourself to the thirty kids in your class. You are comparing yourself to every twelve-year-old on planet Earth who has chosen to perform a version of themselves, professionally and with good lighting, on a platform designed by adults to maximize the amount of time you spend looking at it.

You will lose that comparison. You will lose it every time. There is no possible curated self of yours that can compete with the curated selves of nine hundred thousand strangers. The math just does not work.

What you are comparing yourself to is not a person.

What you are comparing yourself to is a highlight reel.



Here is the trick the highlight reel pulls on you, and once you see it, you cannot unsee it.

The highlight reel is the top one percent of someone else's life, edited together with strategic cuts, presented with intent, often at angles that took fourteen tries to capture. The highlight reel is the moments their friends took good pictures of them, on the days they liked their face, in the outfits that worked, at the events that turned out fun.

What you are comparing it to is your behind-the-scenes. Your unflattering selfie that you did not post. Your boring Tuesday afternoon in your bedroom. Your kitchen at midnight with the dirty dishes you have not done. Your hair the way it actually looks at 7:42 a.m. on a school day. Your feelings — the messy, three-in-the-morning, *what is wrong with me* feelings — that you have never, ever posted anywhere.

You are comparing the worst of yourself to the curated best of strangers.

You will, again, lose this comparison every time.

This is not a flaw in you. This is not because you are uniquely behind. This is because the architecture of the comparison is rigged against you. You are playing a game in which the rules are: show your worst, see only their best, conclude that they are winning. No human nervous system can play that game without losing.

The trick is recognizing that the game is rigged. The trick is not playing.



Kezia, on Thursday morning, walked into Ms. Calloway's Tuesday lunch block — except it was Thursday, because Ms. Calloway also held a Thursday session for kids who wanted to drop in — and sat down.

Ms. Calloway said, *Kezia. What is going on.*

Kezia said, *Ms. Calloway. I was scrolling last night. I scrolled for two hours. I felt bad the whole time. I am still feeling bad this morning.*

Ms. Calloway said, *Kezia. Tell me what you saw.*

Kezia told her. The Los Angeles girl. The basketball game girl. Aruba. The twelve-year-old baker with the nine hundred thousand followers.

Ms. Calloway listened.

When Kezia was done, Ms. Calloway said:

Kezia. *I am going to ask you a question. You can refuse to answer it.*

Okay.

The four people you just described – do you know any of them.

Kezia said, *one. The Aruba girl. We have one class together. We have never had a real conversation.*

Ms. Calloway said, *so you know one of them slightly. The other three are strangers. The four of them combined are, in some sense, the jury you have been imagining in your head when you scroll. The jury has been delivering a verdict on your life for – how long.*

Kezia said, *years.*

Ms. Calloway said, *Kezia. The jury is not real. The four people are not actually rendering any verdict on you. Three of them do not know you exist. One of them is your classmate who, I would bet a small amount of money, has never thought about you specifically. The jury is something your brain is constructing out of their highlight reels. You are the one in the chair. You are also the one rendering the verdict. The jury is a hallucination.*

Kezia said, *Ms. Calloway, that is – that does not actually make me feel better.*

Ms. Calloway laughed.

She said, I know. The seeing-the-hallucination does not make the hallucination stop. It just gives you a small wedge for refusing to take its verdicts seriously.

She paused.

Kezia. Can I tell you something specific.

Yes.

Kezia. The cohort and I have been watching you carefully for a long time. You have a lot going on at home that you have not, in detail, told most of us about. I know about pieces. The cohort knows about pieces. You have been managing a lot, for a kid your age, mostly by yourself, while presenting on your Instagram a version of yourself that is fine. The cost of the gap is what you felt last night. The cost is real. The cost is paid in the eleven-fifteen scrolls and the bottoming-out feeling and the exhaustion.

The way out of the trap — and I want to be honest with you that it is not easy and it is not fast — is to make the gap smaller. Not by posting the hard stuff publicly. Not by performing the not-fine version of yourself for strangers. The gap is closed privately, in your real life, with real people, by letting more people see the actual you and not the curated you.

The cohort sees pieces of the actual you. Sofia sees more than most. Marcus sees some. I see some. Your grandmother — when she is having a good day — sees a lot. Each person who sees the actual you makes the gap smaller in your nervous system. The gap is not about Instagram. The gap is about how many real people, in real life, have seen the version of you that is not the highlight reel.

The Comparison Trap stops being so loud when the gap is small. Not because the trap goes away — the trap is the trap, the trap will be there your whole life — but because, when the gap is small, you have evidence in your real life that you are seen as

you are, by people who love you anyway, and the evidence makes the highlight reels of strangers less powerful.

Kezia said, Ms. Calloway. How do I – how do I make the gap smaller.

Ms. Calloway said, Kezia. Tell Sofia one true thing this week that you have not yet told her. Just one. Pick a small one. Tell it. See what happens.

Kezia said, *what if it is – what if it is big.*

Ms. Calloway said, Kezia. Start with small. You will get to the big ones. Start with one small true thing. The small ones build the road.

Kezia said, *okay.*

She walked out of Ms. Calloway's office. She walked to fifth period.

That night, instead of scrolling, she texted Sofia.

She texted: Sof. *Can I tell you a thing.*

Sofia texted back: Yes.

Kezia texted: *I was at the grocery store with my grandma on Saturday and she could not remember which aisle the bread was in. I helped her find it. I have not told anybody. I have been carrying it all week.*

Sofia, in Lincoln Park, in her bedroom, read the text.

Sofia texted back: Kez. *I am so sorry. That is a real thing to carry. I am glad you told me.*

Kezia texted: *thanks Sof.*

Sofia texted: Kez. *Anytime you want to tell me a thing, tell me. The cohort can hold it. I can hold it. We are right here.*

Kezia put the phone down. She lay in bed. She did not scroll. She slept by eleven-twenty.

This is what closing the gap looks like, on the smallest possible day. It looks like one text. To one person. About one true thing. The text does not solve anything. The grandma still

has dementia. The phone is still going to be heavy tomorrow. The Comparison Trap is still going to be the Comparison Trap.

But Kezia, tonight, has slightly less highlight-reel and slightly more behind-the-scenes shared with somebody who matters.

The gap is slightly smaller.

The work is the closing of the gap. The work is slow. The work is one text at a time, one true sentence at a time, one cohort kid at a time.

That is the work.

You can do it.

You are old enough.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Friend Test

Marcus, on a Wednesday in early December, sat at his desk in Room 36 with a worksheet in front of him.

The worksheet had two columns.

The left column was titled *What I said to myself*. The right column was titled *What I would have said to my best friend*.

Mr. Patel had handed the worksheet out at the start of class. He had said, *friends. We are doing one exercise today. We have been talking about the Compassionate Witness for three weeks. Today we are going to test her. The test is simple. I want you to write, in the left column, the actual sentences you said to yourself this week when something went wrong. Then I want you to imagine – and this is where most of you are going to do real work – I want you to imagine that your best friend came to you with the same situation, and I want you to write, in the right column, what you would have said to them.*

He paused.

That is the exercise. The exercise is private. I am not going to read it. You are going to keep it in your notebook.

He paused again.

One last thing. If, when you compare the two columns, the right column is much kinder than the left – that is the Friend Test. That is the gap we have been talking about. The Friend Test tells you, in the most direct possible way, that you are talking to

yourself in a voice you would not let anybody else use on your friend.

He sat down at his desk.

The cohort wrote.

Marcus wrote the left column quickly.

The thing that went wrong this week was that I lost my temper at Aaliyah on Sunday. I did not call her names — I have not done that since fourth grade. But I said something sharp to her about a thing she had borrowed from my room and broken. The thing was small. It was a pen. I do not actually care about the pen. I was, in the moment, just frustrated about something else, and I took it out on her. She said I am sorry and walked away looking small. I have been carrying it since Sunday.

What I said to myself: you are a bad brother. You promised yourself when you were six, after the bike thing, that you would not do this kind of thing to Aaliyah. You have been doing it anyway. You are the thing you said you would not be. You are going to keep being it. The August 14 ice cream thing is a joke if you are going to act like this on a random Sunday in December.

He read it.

His chest did the thing it does when the Critic is loud.

He sat with it for a minute.

Then he read the right-column prompt.

What would you say to your best friend if they came to you with the same situation?

He sat there for two minutes. He looked at the prompt. He looked at his left column. He picked up the pen. He wrote a sentence. He scratched it out. He wrote another sentence. He scratched that one out too. He was having, for the first time in his life, a very specific cognitive experience, and the experience was: I genuinely do not know how to be kind to myself.

He knew how to be kind to other people. If Theo, his best cohort friend, came to him tomorrow and said *I lost it on my sister last week, I said something sharp, I cannot shake it — Marcus would have a response ready. Marcus's response would be something like Theo. You were stressed. It was one moment. You did not call her names. You apologized — and you can apologize again if you want to. She is going to be fine. You are going to be fine. The carrying is not helping her. The carrying is just punishing you. Put it down.*

Marcus knew how to write that paragraph for Theo.

Marcus could not write that paragraph for himself.

When he tried, the words came out wrong. The words came out with a *but* attached. *You apologized — but you still meant it when you said it. You are a good brother — but a good brother would not have said that. It was one moment — but it was a moment that revealed who you really are.*

The *but* is the Critic.

The Critic has spent twelve years getting good at sneaking *buts* into the sentence. The Critic knows that an outright attack will trigger Marcus's defenses. The Critic knows that a sneaky *but* will slide past the defenses and land in the soft part underneath. So the Critic delivers the Compassionate Witness's opening line, and then adds a *but*, and the whole sentence collapses back into self-punishment.

This is how good the Critic is. It is impressive, in a way. The Critic is not stupid. The Critic has been training on Marcus for his entire conscious life and it knows where every soft spot is. The Critic can mimic the Compassionate Witness, almost flawlessly, for the first six words, and then it does the thing.



The work of the next two years — and we are being honest about the timeline here, this is not a one-lesson fix — is to start catching the *but*. To notice, when the sentence starts to turn, that the turn is happening.

To stop the sentence at the *but*.

To say to yourself: *no, finish the actual sentence. The Compassionate Witness sentence. Without the but.*

You apologized, and that is what accountability looks like. You meant it when you said the sharp thing because you were twelve and frustrated, and that is what twelve-year-olds do when they are frustrated. You are allowed to make a mistake of that size and still be a person worth loving. You are not the worst thing you have ever said. You are the whole person, across years, who said one sharp thing on a Sunday in December and one kind thing on a Monday, and over time the average is going to be okay.

That is a sentence with no *but* in it.

It does not feel quite true to Marcus yet. That is okay. He did not write it because it felt true. He wrote it because Mr. Patel asked him to write it, and because the writing is the practice, and because — and this is the part the curriculum does not tell you out loud, but is absolutely true — *you have to write a sentence many times before you get to believe it. The believing is not the prerequisite to the writing.*

The writing is the prerequisite to the believing.

You write the new sentence. You write it badly. You write it again. You write it a hundred times, in journal after journal, in moment after moment, until one day — and it will not feel like a single day, it will feel like a slow leak — the new sentence has become the more natural one, and the *but* has lost a little of its grip, and the Compassionate Witness is, for thirty seconds at a stretch, the louder voice.

That is how this works. It is slow. It is not glamorous. It is not a single epiphany. It is just the daily practice of writing the sentence without the *but*, over and over, until the *but* gets tired and gives up some ground.

It works. It really, actually works. Adults who do this in their thirties and forties — people who finally figure out that they can talk to themselves the way they have, all their lives, talked to their friends — describe the change as one of the most consequential of their adult lives. *Why did no one tell me this when I was younger*, they say. *Why did no one tell me when I was twelve*.

Somebody is telling you. We are telling you. The book is the somebody.

Catch the *but*. Finish the sentence without it. Do it again tomorrow.

That is the practice.



Marcus, after class, walked to Aaliyah's bedroom that afternoon. Aaliyah was on her bed, doing homework.

Marcus said, *Aal. Sunday. The pen.*

Aaliyah said, *Marcus. I have already forgotten about it. You are doing the thing.*

Marcus said, *what thing.*

Aaliyah said, *the thing where you carry something for four days and then come find me. I have seen you do this since I was six. I have, in fact, been counting on you doing it. You always come find me.*

Marcus laughed.

He said, *Aal. The pen.*

Aaliyah said, *Marcus. The pen was a pen. You snapped at me. You snap at me sometimes. I snap at you sometimes. We are*

siblings. *The snapping is – it is the lowest level of cohabitation problem in the history of cohabitation. I am eight. I am the most resilient unit in this house. I have already moved on.*

Marcus said, *I am sorry I snapped.*

Aaliyah said, *I forgive you. Can you leave my room now.*

Marcus said, *okay.*

He left her room. He walked back to his own room.

He wrote, in his notebook:

Aaliyah is the most resilient unit in this house. I am writing this down because the Critic, in four days, when she tries to pull this back out, is going to need to be reminded.

He closed the notebook. He went to dinner.

The Critic, that night at eleven-twenty, did try to pull the Sunday thing back out.

Marcus, in bed, said in his head: *Aaliyah forgave me. She told me she had already moved on. The Critic is recycling old material. The pen is done.*

The Critic was, for that night, quieter than usual.

This is what the Friend Test does, when you actually use it. It does not silence the Critic forever. The Critic is the Critic. The Critic is going to be there in adulthood and middle age and old age. But the Friend Test gives you a check. The Friend Test gives you a way of asking, in the middle of self-flagellation, *would I let anybody use these exact words on Aaliyah?*

The answer is always no.

The answer being no is the wedge.

The wedge is what lets the Compassionate Witness get a word in. That is how this works.

Use the test.

You will get better at it.

– J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rewriting the Script

This is the most important chapter in Part Two.

It is also the hardest one. If you are not ready for it today, you can skip to the next chapter, and you can come back to this one later. The book is not going anywhere. Some chapters are for right now, and some chapters are for when you are ready, and only you know which is which.

If you stay — here is what we are going to talk about.

We are going to talk about scripts.



A script is a sentence you carry about yourself that you treat as true without examining.

You have several. Everyone does. Some of them are useful and accurate. *I am a person who likes the color blue. I am a person who is funny with my close friends. I am a person who is good at remembering song lyrics.* Those scripts are fine. Those scripts are descriptive. Those scripts can keep doing their job.

The scripts we are concerned with in this chapter are the ones that are not descriptive — the ones that are judgmental, and global, and delivered to you in a voice that was not yours to begin with.

I am not smart enough.

I do not belong here.

I always mess things up.

I am a burden.

Nobody really wants me around.

I am unlovable when I am not performing.

Something is fundamentally wrong with me.

Read those slowly. If your eyes caught on one of them — if your body did something at one of them, a small constricting feeling, a yes — that is information. That sentence is in your file. You did not put it there. But it is there now, and it is running quietly underneath everything you do, and it is shaping the way you experience your own life.

That is a script.



Here is the painful thing about scripts.

Most of them were not written by you.

Most of them were written by somebody in your life, at some point, often before you were old enough to know what was being written. A parent who, in a stressed moment, said the wrong thing — and it was an aberration, and they did not mean it, but it landed, and the seven-year-old version of you wrote it down. A teacher who singled you out, on a bad day, in front of a class — and you wrote down what their face said about you. A grandparent, an aunt, a coach, an older sibling, a kid in second grade who teased you for one specific thing — anyone, at any moment, who delivered a sentence about you that you absorbed and have been quietly carrying ever since.

Sometimes the scripts were not delivered by a single person, but by a system. The way your school treated kids who looked like you. The way the media depicted people from your community. The way the adults around you talked about the kind of family you came from, or the kind of body you had, or the way you learned, or did not learn. Systemic scripts are

harder to identify because they do not have a single author — they come from the air — but they are no less real, and they are often the heaviest ones in the file.

You did not consent to any of this.

You did not get to decide which scripts you absorbed and which you did not. You were a child. You were taking in language. You were doing what every child does, which is build a sense of who you are out of the materials available to you.

The materials were what they were. Some of them were good. Some of them were not.

You are old enough now to look at what is in the file.



Mr. Patel, in mid-December, gave the cohort a five-section worksheet. The worksheet said:

1. *A script I carry about myself.*
2. *Where it came from.*
3. *Evidence that contradicts it.*
4. *What it costs me to keep it.*
5. *A more accurate, fair version.*

He said, *friends. This is the heaviest exercise we have done all year. You can do it in pieces. You can do it across multiple sittings. You can do it and then put it away for a week. You do not have to finish today. The book is patient.*

He said, *one more thing. This is private. I will not collect it. I will never see it. If you want to talk to me about something that came up, my door is open. If you want to talk to Ms. Calloway about something that came up, her door is also open. If anything you write makes you realize there is something heavy you have not told a trusted adult about, please tell someone. Me. Ms. Calloway. Ms. Wong, who is the school counselor. Your parents.*

Your grandparents. The 988 Lifeline. Help exists. The exercise is — in some real way — an exercise designed to find the heavy things that have been quietly underneath. If you find one, you do not have to carry it alone anymore.

He passed out the worksheets.

The cohort wrote.

We are not going to show you what most of them wrote. The scripts they identified are private. But we will show you Theo's, because Theo's is in some ways the most surprising — because Theo is the cohort's noticer and the cohort assumes Theo does not himself carry scripts.

Theo wrote, in pencil, in his notebook:

Section 1. *The script: I am the one who watches. I am not the one who is watched.*

Section 2. *Where it came from: I do not know exactly. I think it started somewhere around second grade. I was small for my grade. I was quiet. The teachers, when they were dividing the class for things, would always put me with kids who needed somebody to watch them. I think I was being trained, in some way, to be a watcher. It also might have been the family. My parents have always asked me to look out for my sister Lena, who is older than I am but who has been — I do not have the word for this — Lena is the kind of older sister who needs looking out for, not the kind who looks out. So I have, since I was small, been the noticing one. I think the script is that I am not the protagonist of any room. I am the kid in the background watching the room. The protagonist is somebody else.*

Section 3. *Evidence that contradicts it: I am the protagonist of my own life. I am also, sometimes, the protagonist of the cohort — the cohort has, at certain moments, been organized around something I noticed. Hm. I am not, actually, finding a lot of*

evidence I am the protagonist. Most of my evidence is that I am the watcher in cohort stories.

Section 4. What it costs me to keep it: I am tired. The watching is tiring. I do it whether or not I am being paid attention to. I am, in some real way, watching the room even at the cohort lunch table. The cost is that I do not get to ever fully relax. The watcher is always on duty.

Section 5. A more accurate, fair version: I am a person who notices things. The noticing is a gift. The noticing is also one thing about me, not the only thing. There is a Theo underneath the watcher. The Theo underneath the watcher is – I do not yet know. I want to find out. I am twelve. I have time.

He read what he wrote. He read it twice. He put the notebook away.

He walked, after class, to Ms. Calloway's office.

He had not, in years, gone to Ms. Calloway specifically. He had been doing the noticing in middle school more or less by himself, with the cohort's help in pieces. The Tuesday lunch block was the cohort-collective time with Ms. Calloway. A solo visit was different. A solo visit meant something.

He knocked.

Ms. Calloway said, *Theo. Come in.*

He sat down.

He said, *Ms. Calloway. I think I just figured out a script.*

She said, *tell me.*

He told her.

She listened.

When he was done, she said:

Theo. Thank you for telling me. I have been wondering, for a couple of years, when you were going to identify this one. I have been – and I want to be honest with you – I have been gently letting it sit, because you needed to find it yourself. You found it.

He said, Ms. Calloway. What do I do.

She said, Theo. You do not, today, do anything. The finding is the first step. The next step is — and this is going to take the rest of seventh grade, and probably eighth, and probably high school — the next step is experimenting with not watching. Trying, on purpose, in small ways, to be in rooms and not scan them. To let yourself be the protagonist of small moments. To say things in class without first reading the room. To make jokes you did not know in advance would land. To, occasionally, be the kid in the cohort who is carried rather than the kid who carries.

She paused.

Theo. The cohort has been getting ready to carry you. They have known, for a while, that you have been doing more carrying than getting carried. They have been waiting for you to let them. Let them. The carrying back is going to be one of the most healing things you will ever feel.

He said, Ms. Calloway. The Critic in my head — the version of her that is mine — is telling me right now that I do not deserve carrying.

She said, Theo. The script. The script is talking. The script is wrong. Catch it. Finish the sentence without the but. Walk out of my office, go find a cohort kid, and let them know you have been tired this week.

He said, okay.

He walked out of Ms. Calloway's office. He walked to fifth period.

After fifth period, he found Marcus at his locker.

He said, Marcus.

Marcus said, Theo.

Theo said, Marcus. I have been tired this fall. I have not, until just now, told anybody. I am telling you because Ms. Calloway told me to tell at least one of you.

Marcus said, *Theo. I have been waiting for you to tell me.*

Theo said, *you knew?*

Marcus said, *Theo. The noticing kid does not get to hide from the cohort forever. I have noticed you have been tired since October. I have not pressed because I thought you would tell me when you were ready. I am glad you are ready.*

Theo said, *Marcus. Thank you.*

Marcus said, *Theo. The cohort is going to take some of the noticing for the rest of the year. You do not have to do it all. We are going to spread it out.*

Theo said, *I do not know how that works.*

Marcus said, *we will figure it out.*

This is what catching a script and starting to rewrite it looks like, on the smallest possible day.

It looks like an exercise. It looks like a visit to a teacher. It looks like one cohort kid being told I am tired by another cohort kid, in a hallway, after fifth period.

The script does not vanish in one afternoon. The script is twelve years old. The script is going to keep showing up, in small ways, for years. But Theo has, today, put it on a piece of paper, and named it, and told another person about it. Those three steps are, in some real way, the beginning of every script-rewriting that has ever happened.

The script told Theo he did not deserve carrying. The script was wrong. Marcus is now carrying a small piece of Theo. The carrying is the evidence.

The evidence beats the script, eventually.

Over time. With practice.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

What Room 36 Has Built So Far (Part Two)

It is the third week of December.

If you walked into Room 36 this morning, you would see something different than you saw on the first day of school. Six anchor charts from Part One are on the wall. They have been joined, over the last eight weeks, by five more.

The Internal Critic & The Compassionate Witness.

The Three Tactics: Catastrophizing, Globalizing, Personalizing.

Highlight Reels & The Comparison Trap.

The Friend Test.

Catch the But.

There is no anchor chart for the Script lesson. Mr. Patel decided, at the planning stage, not to put one up. Some lessons do not need a poster.

The cohort, this morning, is doing something they will do every December for the rest of seventh grade — they are reading the letter they wrote to themselves at the end of Part One, the October letters that Mr. Patel kept in the drawer.

Mr. Patel handed the letters back at the start of class, sealed, each one with the student's name on the envelope.

Some students do not, at first, remember writing the letters. Most of them remember as soon as they unfold them.

Amara, in the second row, is reading her October letter, and her face is doing something complicated. She wrote, in October, *I hope you have, by May, gotten the cohort-Amara percentage to higher than fifty. Not all the way to a hundred. Just higher than fifty.* In December, having spent eight weeks getting acquainted with her own Internal Critic and writing her first Compassionate Witness sentences, she reads that line and something — something that she will not be able to name out loud, but that her body knows — releases a little.

She is not at fifty-percent yet. She is, however, higher than she was. The gap has narrowed. By six percent, maybe. By eight, on a good day. Numbers do not matter. The gap is narrower than it was, and she can tell, and that is the first time in her life she has been able to track this kind of change in herself.

That tracking is its own architecture.

Jordan is reading his October letter and laughing, quietly, at how October-Jordan sounded. The thing he wrote — *show one story to one cohort kid by May* — Marcus, probably — he has not done yet. But he has, in the last two weeks, been writing in his notebook more deliberately. He has been showing the notebook to Dr. Pam, who has been gentle about it. He is not, yet, ready to show a cohort kid. He is, however, no longer pretending the notebook does not exist. That is the first step of every actual change anyone has ever made.

Maya is reading her October letter — the drawing of the coat with LABEL outside and AUTHOR inside — and crying a very small amount, just at the corners of her eyes. She has drawn the coat again, three times, in her sketchbook since October. Each time the figure underneath the coat is a little more visible. She is — and she knows this, even at twelve —

she is the figure. The figure is growing. The coat is, slowly, optional.

Darius is reading his October letter and is — and this is the surprise — Darius is at the dinner table. He has been there for two months now. He did not announce it. He just, after the conversation with Imani, sat down. Imani looked at him, did not make a thing of it, asked him if he wanted the rice. He said yes. They have been at the dinner table together every night since. The Tuesday-September moment is, by mid-December, a thing of the past. The four steps worked. *Acknowledge, repair, commit, move on.* He is on step four. He has been on step four for two months.

Kezia is reading her October letter — *the phone is heavy* — and the phone, by December, is two pounds lighter. Not literally. The phone weighs the same. But Kezia has unfollowed forty-seven accounts. She has not posted anything in two months. She has been texting Sofia true things on most nights. The bottoming-out feeling — the one between exhausted and invisible — is less frequent now. Not gone. Less.

Marcus is reading his October letter and thinking about the screenshot card that is still on the Wall. He has not, since putting it up in September, written another card. He is going to, by April, write three more. The Wall has, for Marcus, become a tool he reaches for when the carrying gets too heavy to keep silent. Not every time. Not for every weight. But for the ones that are big enough to need to be public-but-private — the ones that need to be out of his head but not announced to the world — the Wall is the architecture.

Sofia ate lunch with the science girls' table on Wednesday and used the script.

This is, in some real way, the news of December.

The science girls' table had been heading toward another Reese-mocking. They had been warming up to it. Sofia had felt the temperature in the room — Sofia had been, all fall, practicing the noticing — and Sofia had said, in the moment, the six syllables.

Come on. That is enough.

Volume Five. Not Volume Ten.

She had said it with her own face. She had said it without looking at her phone. She had said it in a tone that was, in some real way, calm. Not preachy. Not heroic. Just calm.

The table had paused.

One of the girls had said *oh-kay*. In a slightly mocking tone. But — and this was the part Sofia had not expected — the mocking tone had not landed. The table had been a little embarrassed. The dismantling had not continued. Lunch had moved on to a different topic.

Sofia, in her notebook that night, had written:

December 14. I used the script. It worked. Not in the sense of I made everybody better people. The girls who were going to mock Reese are going to mock somebody else next week. But — the script worked in the sense that the eleven-minute dismantle did not happen, this Wednesday, in front of me. I do not know if anybody noticed that I changed it. The table will not, by next week, remember that anything happened. But I will. I changed the room. The room counted my vote. Volume Five works.

She had read what she wrote. She had texted Mia.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, had texted back: *Sof. You did it. I knew you would. I am very proud of you.*

Sofia had put the phone down. She had slept.

This is — Mr. Patel writes in his journal at home, that night, after the December check-in — this is what eight weeks of Part Two has built. Not a single dramatic breakthrough. Not a

montage in a movie. A floor under their feet that they can feel, a vocabulary in their mouths that they can use, and a voice in their heads — small, still developing, still very quiet compared to the Critic — that is starting to talk back.

The cohort, watching them read the October letters in silence, is doing what the cohort always does when given this kind of prompt. They are reading. They are sitting with the distance traveled. They are noticing that the October-versions of themselves had hopes that the December-versions of themselves have, in pieces, started to meet.

Mr. Patel, sitting at his desk, watches them read.

He does not say anything for a long time.

When most of them have finished, he says:

Friends. In January, we are going to start Part Three. Part Three is about forgiving the people who hurt you. This is harder than the work we have been doing so far. You could not have done Part Three in September. You did not have the floor.

You have the floor now.

You also have the walls.

Take a breath. The light gets in through the cracks for a reason.

The bell rings.

The cohort walks out.

The Mistake Wall, in the hallway outside Room 36, has eighty-four cards on it now. Up from eight on the first day. Many of them by cohort kids. Many of them by other seventh-graders who have started — slowly, in November and December — to use the Wall on their own. Mr. Patel has, every Friday afternoon, walked past the Wall and read whatever new cards are there. Some of them lead him to gentle check-ins with kids. Some of them are just held in silence. The Wall, in

seventh grade, is — as it has been since first grade — the visible part of the work the cohort is doing in private.

The Wall is going to keep getting fuller through January and February and March and April.

By June, it will have over two hundred cards.

The cohort is not yet done.

Part Three begins after winter break.

PART THREE



Empathy & Forgiving Others

*How do I stop carrying what someone else
did?*

January. February. March. The work goes outward.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Impact vs. Intent

Mia did not mean to leave Sofia out of the New Year's Eve call.

This is the most important sentence in this chapter, and it is also the sentence that does not, by itself, repair anything. Mia did not mean to leave Sofia out, and Sofia was left out. Both of those things are true. Both of those things are independent of each other. The repair, when it eventually happens, has to account for both.

But first, here is what happened.

On New Year's Eve, Mia in Pittsburgh had three of her Pittsburgh friends over. They were going to do a small thing — a movie, snacks, a video call with one Pittsburgh friend who was out of town in Florida visiting family. The plan had been small. Mia had set up the video call for ten p.m. her time, which would be ten p.m. Pittsburgh time, which would also be ten p.m. Lincoln Park time, because they are in the same time zone.

The cohort, in Lincoln Park, had its own New Year's Eve plan. Sofia's house. Most of the cohort. Movie. Snacks. The usual cohort basement gathering.

Mia had, on Mia's end, been planning to also call Sofia at midnight, the way they did most New Year's Eves. The midnight call was a tradition. What Mia had not done was put Sofia on the ten p.m. video call list with the Pittsburgh friends.

The ten p.m. call was a Pittsburgh-friends thing, in Mia's head, separate from the midnight Sofia call.

Sofia, in Lincoln Park, at ten p.m., was on her phone in the cohort basement when she saw a post Mia had made — a quick snap of the four Pittsburgh friends laughing on a video call. The post was captioned *NYE crew*.

Sofia stared at the post for a long second.

Sofia had been Mia's NYE call for six years.

Sofia had not been on this call.

Sofia put her phone down.

The cohort was watching a movie. Marcus, who was on the couch next to Sofia, noticed Sofia's face go still. Marcus, who has been the cohort's most reliable detector of Sofia going still since first grade, did not say anything immediately. Marcus just nudged her shoulder gently with his.

Sofia said, quietly, *I am fine*.

Marcus said, *Sof*.

Sofia said, *I am*.

Marcus said, *okay*.

Sofia, by 11:45 p.m., had been sitting with the small wound for an hour and forty-five minutes.

The midnight call came in. Mia, on the screen, smiling. Sofia answered. Sofia, for thirty seconds, did the *happy new year* version. Then Sofia said, *Mi, I have to go, the cohort wants to do midnight things*. The cohort was, in fact, not doing midnight things. The cohort was watching the movie. Sofia hung up.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, stared at her phone for ten seconds.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, knew immediately that something was wrong. The cohort, for six years, had not cut Mia's midnight call short. The midnight call had been, by long-running tradition, ten to fifteen minutes. The hanging up at thirty

seconds was — Mia could feel — a sentence Sofia had not yet said out loud.

Mia did not text Sofia that night. Mia waited until the next morning.

Mia texted: *Sof. Are you okay.*

Sofia texted back, two hours later: *Mi. I am fine.*

Mia texted: *Sof. You are not fine. The midnight call was thirty seconds. Are you mad at me?*

Sofia, in her bedroom in Lincoln Park, sat with the phone for ten minutes. She typed three different responses. She deleted all three. She finally typed:

I saw the post from your ten p.m. call. I was not on it. I have been on every NYE call we have done since we were nine. I know it is — I know it is dumb. But it hurt. I am sad. I will get over it. I am going to take some time.

She hit send.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, read it.

Mia immediately understood several things at once.

Mia had not meant to leave Sofia off the ten p.m. call. Mia had been thinking about the call as the Pittsburgh-friends call, separate from the Lincoln Park midnight call. The two had been, in Mia's head, two different events. Mia had not, in her own head, excluded Sofia from anything. Sofia was on the midnight call, the way she had always been.

But — and this was the part Mia immediately got — Sofia did not have Mia's head. Sofia had Sofia's head. Sofia's head had seen a post of Mia's NYE crew that Sofia was not in. The version of the night that Sofia had received was: *Mia has new NYE crew, and Sofia is not in it.*

That was the impact. The impact did not care what Mia had intended.

Mia thought for a long minute about what to say.

She typed:

Sof. You are not dumb. I get it. I made a mistake. I had two calls in my head – the Pittsburgh-friends one and our midnight one – and I did not realize that you would see the Pittsburgh one and feel left out. I should have put you on the Pittsburgh one. Or I should have called you separately at ten and explained. Or I should have at least told you in advance there was a ten p.m. one. The thing is – I did not, in my head, leave you out. But I did. In your experience, I left you out. The intention does not change that. I am sorry.

She read it. She sent it.

Sofia, in Lincoln Park, read it.

Sofia, in Lincoln Park, started crying. Not big crying. Small relief crying.

Sofia texted: *Mi. Thank you. I needed to hear that. I am – I am still going to take the day. But thank you.*

Mia texted: *Sof. Take the day. Call me tomorrow.*

Sofia took the day. Sofia called Mia on the second of January. They talked for an hour. The thing was, by the end of the call, resolved.

But this is not just a story about a thing being resolved. This is a story about a phrase, and the phrase is important enough that we are going to spend some time on it.

The phrase is:

Impact is not determined by intent.



What Mia intended was to invite three Pittsburgh friends to a ten p.m. call. What she actually did, in the world, was leave Sofia out of an NYE moment that Sofia had been part of for six years. The intention does not change the impact. The impact does not change the intention either.

But — and this is the part that takes most people years to learn — *repair addresses impact, not intent.*

That is the part nobody is told.

When you have hurt somebody, even by accident, the question is not whether you meant to. The question is what landed. The question is what they experienced. The question is what they are now carrying because of something you did, whether or not you intended it.

The intention is your internal fact. The impact is the external fact. The internal fact does not, by itself, undo the external one. The intention does not magically un-hurt the person.

That said: the intention is not worthless, either.

Knowing the intention helps the person you hurt contextualize what happened. *Mia did not mean to leave me out* is, for Sofia, a real piece of information. It changes the story Sofia tells herself about Mia. It means Mia is not, in Sofia's mind, the kind of friend who is rotating Sofia out for Pittsburgh friends on purpose. The intention is, in some real way, exculpatory — it tells Sofia about who Mia is.

But the intention is exculpatory for Mia. It is not curative for Sofia. The hurt is in Sofia. The hurt does not go away because Mia did not intend it.

What does — sometimes — make the hurt go away is the repair. And the repair has a shape.

Mia's text — *I get it. I made a mistake. I should have put you on the Pittsburgh one. Or I should have called you separately. The intention does not change that. I am sorry* — is the shape.

The shape is:

One. *I see the impact.*

Two. *I am not defending the intention as a way to dismiss the impact.*

Three. *I am sorry.*

That is the whole repair. Three lines. It does not take a paragraph. It does not require Mia to perform regret beyond what is genuine. It does not require Mia to grovel.

What it does require is that Mia not defend the intention. That is the trap most people fall into. Most people, when they have hurt somebody by accident, say *I did not mean to* and *I did not mean to* and *I did not mean to*, over and over, because they think the saying-it-again will eventually convince the person that the impact was not real. The repeating does the opposite. The repeating makes the hurt person feel unseen — because their hurt is being treated as something that should be made smaller by Mia's intention, and the hurt is not being made smaller. The repeating, in some real way, adds to the hurt.

The shape of the actual repair is one mention of intention — *I did not mean to* — followed by acknowledgment of impact — *but I see that I did* — and then apology.

One. Once. Then move on.

Mia, at twelve, had this shape because Mia had, like the rest of the cohort, been doing the *acknowledge, repair, commit, move on* practice since fourth grade. Mia knew the shape in her muscles. The text she wrote came out fast because the shape was already there.

Most adults, even, do not have this shape.

Most adults, when they hurt somebody by accident, perform a kind of defensive intention-explanation that the hurt person experiences as further injury.

You — the kids reading this — are being given the shape at twelve. That is a gift.

Use it.

The shape does not solve every hurt. The shape does not, in some cases, fully heal a wound. But the shape is — in the same way the four steps for mistakes are — the architecture of the repair. The shape gives you something to build with. You can do the shape badly the first ten times. You will get better.

By the time you are twenty, you will be one of the small number of people in the world who has, in their muscles, the practice of *I see the impact, I am not defending the intention, I am sorry*.

That is the work of Chapter Fourteen.

That is the beginning of Part Three.

The rest of Part Three is about what happens when somebody hurts you and does not do the shape. What happens when the impact is real and the repair never comes. What happens when you are the kid sitting with a thing the other kid is not going to acknowledge.

That is the harder part of forgiveness.

That is most of forgiveness, in fact.

We start it in Chapter Fifteen.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Forgiveness ≠ Trust

In late January, Amara had to think about Brielle.

Brielle had said something about Amara, in the second week of January, that had gotten back to Amara through three people. The thing Brielle had said had been small but specific. Brielle had said, to Cassidy and one other girl, *Amara is so much weirder this year. Like, she used to be cool, and now she has gone back to that whole I am intense and serious thing she did in sixth grade for a minute. I cannot really hang out with her like this.*

The thing had reached Amara on a Thursday afternoon, from Cassidy directly, who had — and this was important — Cassidy had not been entirely sure she should be telling Amara, but Cassidy had decided that she would rather Amara know than not know. Cassidy had said, *Amara, I want to tell you a thing Brielle said. You can be mad at me for telling you. I just — I thought you should know.* Cassidy had told her.

Amara had thanked Cassidy.

Amara had walked home.

Amara had cried in her bedroom for forty-five minutes.

Then Amara had done something she had not, in a long time, done — she had called her grandmother.

Her grandmother had picked up.

Amara had told her grandmother the whole story.

Amara's grandmother had listened.

When Amara was done, her grandmother had said, *baby*. I want to tell you several things. Are you ready.

Amara had said, yes.

Her grandmother had said:

One. Brielle was wrong to say that. The saying was unkind. Cassidy was right to tell you. The information helps you understand what kind of friend Brielle has been and is.

Two. Baby, you are not weirder this year. You are, in fact, more yourself this year. The cohort-Amara has been getting bigger. The adjacent-Amara has been getting smaller. That is exactly what we have been talking about for years. The fact that Brielle is saying Amara is weirder is, in some real way, Brielle telling on herself. Brielle preferred adjacent-Amara because adjacent-Amara was an easier friend to have. Real-Amara is, to Brielle, more inconvenient. That is the actual translation of what she said.

Three. You are going to have to decide what to do about the friendship. You do not have to decide today. You do not have to decide this week. But you are going to need to think about what kind of friendship Brielle has been offering you, and whether you want to keep accepting it, and what that means.

Four. Whatever you decide, you are going to have to do a thing in your head that we are going to call – I do not know what the cohort calls it, but I am going to call it – putting Brielle down. You are carrying Brielle's words right now. You are going to keep carrying them, in some form, until you choose to put them down. The putting-down is for you, not for Brielle. The putting-down does not require Brielle to apologize. The putting-down does not require you to be friends with Brielle. The putting-down is the work you do in your own head, so that Brielle's words stop renting space in there.

Amara had said, *Grandma*. The cohort calls that something. I think the cohort calls it — I think Ms. Calloway has been teaching us about it for years. Forgiveness, but the kind that does not include trust.

Her grandmother had said, *baby*. Yes. That is exactly what I mean. The forgiving is internal. The trust is between two people. The two are not the same. You can forgive Brielle without trusting Brielle. You can forgive Brielle without ever being close to Brielle again. The forgiveness is yours to give yourself. The trust is a separate, slower question.

Amara had been very quiet for a minute.

Then Amara had said, *Grandma*. How do I — how do I do the putting-down.

Her grandmother had said, *baby*. You start by saying, in your head, what is true. Brielle said what she said. You did not deserve it. The version of you Brielle preferred is not the version of you that is real. Brielle is going to have to find a different friend, because you are not going to be adjacent-Amara anymore, ever again. The Brielle that said what she said is not the kind of friend you want. You forgive her. You do not, however, trust her. You move on.

That is the script, *baby*. You may have to say it many times. You will say it tomorrow morning. You will say it tomorrow at lunch when you see Brielle. You will say it next week, when Brielle and Cassidy walk past your locker. You will say it for as long as it takes for the saying to feel automatic.

That is the practice.

Amara had said, *Grandma*. Thank you.

Her grandmother had said, *Baby*. I am proud of you. Sunday dinner this week, yes?

Amara had said, yes.

She had hung up.

She had sat in her room for a long time.

She had written, in her journal:

Brielle said what she said. I did not deserve it. The version of me Brielle preferred is not the real one. The real one is not weird, the real one is just real. Brielle is going to have to find a different friend. I forgive her. I do not trust her. I am moving on.

She had read it twice. She had closed the journal. She had gone downstairs to dinner.



This is what forgiveness looks like, in seventh grade, when the other person has not apologized and probably will not.

It does not look like a reconciliation.

It does not look like Amara going up to Brielle on Friday and saying *hey, I forgive you for what you said*. That would be — and Amara's grandmother knew this even though Amara had not yet — that would be giving Brielle a piece of information Brielle could weaponize. Brielle did not know that Amara had heard about the comment. Going up to Brielle and announcing forgiveness would have been handing Brielle the script.

Forgiveness, here, is interior.

Forgiveness, here, is Amara doing the work in her own head, in her own journal, in conversations with her grandmother, so that Brielle's words stop running her interior life. The work is evicting Brielle from Amara's head. Brielle had been, since Thursday, living rent-free in Amara's head. Amara was going to make her leave.

The making-her-leave is forgiveness.

The making-her-leave does not require Brielle to do anything. Brielle does not have to apologize. Brielle does not have to know. Brielle could keep saying things about Amara to Cassidy for the rest of seventh grade and still Amara could, in

her own head, have put Brielle down. The forgiveness is not for Brielle. The forgiveness is for Amara.

This is the most important sentence in the chapter, and we are going to say it three different ways:

Forgiveness is what you do when you stop letting somebody else's behavior continue to shape your inner life.

Forgiveness is the eviction notice you sign for somebody who has been living in your head without paying rent.

Forgiveness is the daily decision to stop carrying what they did, even though they have not asked you to put it down.

Forgiveness, when it works, is one of the most freeing experiences a human being can have. It is also, often, invisible to the person who did the harm. They do not see it. They do not benefit from it. They do not know it happened. The benefit is entirely yours.

The architecture of grace is, in some real way, an architecture of taking back your own house.

That is what Amara did, on a Thursday in January, with her grandmother on the phone.

The cohort, in the coming weeks, would do their own versions. Marcus would do a small version about a kid who had teased him in fifth grade who had moved away. Priya would do one about a teacher in sixth grade who had said something that had stuck. Theo would do one about — and this would be the one the cohort did not know about for years — Theo would do one about an uncle who had hurt his sister Lena when Theo was small, in ways Theo had not, until seventh grade, fully understood. Theo would not do that one alone — Theo would do that one with Ms. Calloway and Ms. Wong and his mother all present, and it would take months. But Theo would, in seventh grade, do the work.

Each of them, in their own way, would be evicting somebody.

The cohort, this winter, is doing the eviction work.



A note about trust.

Forgiveness is not the same as trust.

We are going to say this loudly because the confusion between them has hurt people, including kids your age, including kids in this very curriculum's previous pilots.

If somebody hurt you, you can forgive them — interiorly, in your own head — and also decide that you do not want them in your life anymore. That is allowed. That is, sometimes, the right call.

If somebody hurt you and apologized and did the repair shape — *I see the impact, I am not defending the intention, I am sorry* — and you forgave them, you might let them back into the closer parts of your life. That is the trust question. The trust question is a separate, slower, more careful question.

Trust is rebuilt over time, in small increments, by the person who did the harm doing the thing differently. Trust is not a thing you grant by deciding to. Trust is something you observe building, in the data of how the person behaves in the months after the apology. The person who keeps doing the harm has not earned trust back, no matter how good their apology was. The person who, over six months, behaves consistently and kindly is earning it back, whether or not you have told them so. Trust is data, over time.

Forgiveness is a decision, made interiorly, that does not require their participation.

Most kids — and most adults, frankly — confuse these. They think that forgiving somebody means they have to trust them

again. They think that not trusting somebody means they have not forgiven them. Both confusions cause real harm. The first one keeps people in friendships and relationships that are hurting them, because they think forgiveness requires re-entry. The second one keeps people in resentment they could put down, because they think that putting it down would mean granting access they have not granted.

Forgiveness and trust are two separate ledgers.

You can do the forgiveness work today and not do the trust work for years, or ever. That is allowed.

Amara, in late January, has forgiven Brielle.

Amara, in late January, is not, anymore, going to be close friends with Brielle.

Both are true. Both are mature. Both are what a twelve-year-old who has been in the cohort since first grade has, by Ms. Calloway's long careful design, learned how to do.

Forgiveness is not trust.

Carry that with you for the rest of your life.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Letter of Release

This is the most difficult chapter in this book.

We will go slowly.

You can stop reading at any time, and the chapter will still be here when you come back. The chapter is not in a hurry. You are not behind. There is no part of this you have to do today, or even this year. There is also no part of it you ever have to do, in any sense — the work in this chapter is voluntary, in every direction.

Here is what we are going to do.

We are going to talk about somebody you have been carrying.



Most people, by the time they are twelve or thirteen, are carrying somebody.

Not in a romantic sense. Not in a positive sense. Carrying, in the sense of: *there is a person who hurt you, somewhere in your past — a year ago, three years ago, in second grade, two weeks ago, sometime — and the weight of what they did has not been put down.* You think about them when you are trying to fall asleep. You think about them when something reminds you. You replay what happened. You replay what you wish you had said. You replay what they said, in the actual voice they said it in, with the exact tone, and the replay still — even now,

after all this time — makes your stomach do the thing it did at the time.

That is what carrying somebody is.

You did not sign up to carry them. You are doing it because no one ever taught you how to put them down, and because the alternative — letting them get away with what they did — felt unbearable, and so the carrying became, by default, the way you maintained some sense of justice in your own head.

The carrying does not get them.

It only gets you.

That is the central fact of this chapter, and it is so important that we are going to say it three different ways.

The person who hurt you has moved on with their life. You are reliving what they did, in your head, multiple times a day. The cost of that reliving is paid by you. It is not paid by them.

Resentment is the experience of being hurt by something that already happened. The person who hurt you has finished hurting you. You are continuing to hurt yourself, in their name, long after they have left the building.

The only person paying the price of your resentment, every day, is you.

This is not fair.

It is, in fact, one of the most unfair facts of being human — that the person who did the harm gets to walk away, and the person who absorbed the harm gets to keep paying. But it is also the structure, and pretending the structure is otherwise does not change the structure.

The Letter of Release is a tool.

The Letter of Release is one specific way, of many possible ways, to start putting somebody down.



Before we tell you how to write it, we have to say several things very clearly, because this is the chapter where misunderstandings have caused the most damage.

Release is not the same as saying what happened was okay. Release does not require you to minimize the harm. It does not require you to reframe what they did as not-that-bad. It does not require you to understand them, or to excuse them, or to give them the benefit of the doubt. It is fine to release somebody whose actions were genuinely cruel, genuinely harmful, genuinely unforgivable in the moral sense. Release does not adjudicate the moral status of what they did. Release just stops paying the cost of carrying it.

Release is not the same as reconciling with them. It is not an invitation back into your life. We covered this in Chapter Fifteen. Forgiveness and trust are different. Release lives on the forgiveness side. You can release somebody — release the weight of what they did — and still never speak to them again. That is allowed. That is, sometimes, the only sane choice.

Release is not something you owe them. They have not earned it. They may not deserve it. They may not have apologized. They may not even know they hurt you. None of that matters. Release is not for them. Release is for you. The release is happening inside your nervous system, where they have been living rent-free for too long, and you are the one signing the eviction notice.

Release is not always available. Some hurts are too fresh. Some hurts are too big. Some hurts require professional help — a therapist, a counselor, an adult who is trained to help kids carry the things kids should not have to carry alone. If you find that, when you sit down to try to write a Letter of Release, you cannot — your body will not let you, your hand will not move, you cannot find any sentences — that is a piece

of information. That is your nervous system telling you that the thing is too big for the tool yet. The tool will be available in a year, or two, or five. The thing is not the tool's failure; the thing is the size of the thing. Tell a trusted adult. Get the support that lets the tool, eventually, become usable.

That said. For the smaller carryings — the ones where the body says *I can think about this person without going into total shutdown, but I cannot put them down* — the Letter of Release is a real tool. We are going to walk you through it.



The Letter of Release has four sections.

You do not send the letter. The letter is never given to the person it is about. The letter is, in some real way, a private ritual you do for your own nervous system. The fact that it is never sent is part of what makes it work — the letter does not have to be diplomatic, does not have to be fair, does not have to make sense to anybody but you. It is for you. Nobody else will see it. You can write it in your worst handwriting. You can write it in pencil, on lined paper, in your bedroom, in your worst grammar.

Section One. What you did. Tell the person, in writing, what they did to you. In your own words. With your own anger, if you have anger. With your own sadness, if you have sadness. Without softening it. Without minimizing. Without giving them the benefit of the doubt. Just — what they did. As you experienced it.

Section Two. What it cost me. Tell the person, in writing, what it cost you to be hurt by them. The sleep you lost. The friendships that shifted. The way you saw yourself for years afterward. The version of you that did not exist after them, that might have existed without the hurt. Be specific. Be

honest. Be — and this is the hardest part — be honest with yourself about how much it cost. We minimize, often, even to ourselves. The minimizing is a defense mechanism. Drop it, for the duration of this letter.

Section Three. What I am putting down. This is the actual release part. *I am putting down the daily replay. I am putting down the imagined conversation where I finally tell you. I am putting down the surveillance of your social media to see how you are doing. I am putting down the small daily check-in I have been doing for years in my own head about you. I am putting it all down. Today. Tomorrow. Every day after.*

Section Four. What I am keeping. This is the part most curricula leave out, and it is, in some real way, the most important part. You are not erasing what happened. You are keeping certain things from the experience. *I am keeping the knowledge that I survived this. I am keeping the lessons I learned about who I am. I am keeping the friendships I built in the aftermath. I am keeping the wisdom that came from carrying you for as long as I did.* The keeping is what makes the releasing not a loss. The keeping is what turns the experience, in some real way, into a gain, even though the harm was harm.

That is the letter.

Four sections.

You can write it once. You can write it many times. Some letters get re-written across years, as the person you have been carrying changes shape in your mind. That is normal. The letter is, in some sense, a practice, not an event.



In Mr. Patel's class, in early February, the kids did the Letter of Release exercise.

Mr. Patel said, *friends. This is the heaviest exercise we are going to do all year. I am giving you the Letter of Release framework. I am also telling you that if, when you sit down, your body will not let you write — that is information. Stop. Come see me. Come see Ms. Calloway. Come see Ms. Wong. We will help you figure out what the right next step is. For some of you, that step is going to be writing the letter today. For some of you, it is going to be naming the person and the harm, in your head, this week, and writing the letter later. For some of you, it is going to be deciding, today, that this tool is not yet for you, and that is also fine. Tools are tools. Tools wait for you.*

He passed out paper.

The class wrote — or did not write — for forty minutes.

We are not going to show you any of the cohort's letters. The letters are private. Mr. Patel did not read them; we do not get to either. But we will tell you what happened in the room.

Most of the kids in the room wrote something.

Three of them — Mr. Patel could see this — wrote almost the entire forty minutes, in concentrated, hunched-over silence. Two of them — Mr. Patel could also see this — sat with the pen in their hand and could not, in the forty minutes, write a single sentence. Both of those kids, at the end of class, lingered. Both of them, in separate conversations with Mr. Patel after class, said *I think the person is too big for the letter*. Mr. Patel said, both times, *yes. That is real information. Come see me tomorrow. We will figure out the next step together.*

Both kids did. The next step, in both cases, involved Ms. Calloway and Ms. Wong and — in one case — the kid's parents. The next step, in both cases, took weeks. The next step, in both cases, was real.

That is also the Letter of Release working.

Sometimes the tool's first job is to show you that the person is bigger than the tool. That, by itself, is useful. That, by itself, lets you start asking for help.

The Letter of Release does not always produce a letter.

Sometimes it produces a conversation with a trusted adult.

Both are the work.

The work is the work.



A note to readers.

If you have, while reading this chapter, identified a person you have been carrying — somebody whose weight has been in your nervous system for too long — you are not unusual. Most twelve-year-olds, by twelve, are carrying somebody. So are most adults. The carrying is so common that most people walk around with it without realizing the carrying is not the only option.

You have options now.

You can write the letter. You can do it on a Saturday afternoon, in your bedroom, in pencil, with the door closed. You can put the letter in a drawer when you are done. You can burn the letter if you want — many people do. You can put the letter in a journal and re-read it in a year. You can do whatever you want with the letter, because the letter is yours.

You can also not write the letter today. You can sit with this chapter for a week, or a month, or a year, until the person you are thinking of feels like the right size for the tool. You can come back to this chapter at fifteen, or twenty, or forty. The tool is patient.

You can also, if the carrying is too heavy, ask for help. The 988 Lifeline is one number. Your school counselor is one option. A teacher you trust is one option. A relative who is safe

is one option. The work, in some cases, requires a witness who is trained. There is no shame in asking. The cohort in this book has many trained adults around them. You may or may not. If you do not, find one. Many adults — most adults, in fact — want to be the trained adult for a young person. They are waiting for you to ask. Ask.

The carrying is not the only option.

You have options.

You are allowed to put somebody down. You are allowed to keep something from what they did.

Both.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

What Room 36 Has Built So Far (Part Three)

It is the second week of March.

Part Three is closing. The cohort has spent January and February and the first half of March on the work of forgiving the people who hurt you. Impact vs. Intent. Forgiveness ≠ Trust. The Letter of Release. The work has been, in some real way, the heaviest work of the year so far. The cohort, by mid-March, is — and Mr. Patel writes this in his journal — tired in the way kids only get when they have been doing real interior work for a long stretch.

The cohort is also, by mid-March, different.

Each of them, in some specific way, has put somebody down.

We are not going to recap every story. Some of them have been told. Some have not. Some are too private, even for this book, to lay out in detail. But we will tell you, before Part Three closes, about Jordan — because Jordan has done a thing that nobody, including Jordan, saw coming.

Jordan, in mid-February, wrote a letter to his father.

His father is alive. His father lives in Lincoln Park. His father has been in Jordan's life every day since Jordan was born. The letter was not a Letter of Release in the strict sense — Jordan's father is not somebody Jordan needed to evict from his head

in the same way Amara had to evict Brielle. Jordan's father is loved by Jordan. The relationship is, in most senses, a good one.

But Jordan's father, when Jordan was seven, had done a thing that Jordan had been carrying — quietly, without naming it, even to Dr. Pam — for five years.

Jordan's father had read one of Jordan's stories out loud at a family dinner.

The story had been one Jordan had written in his room, in a notebook, when he was seven. The story had been about a boy who could talk to animals. The story had been four pages long, written in crayon, with bad spelling and run-on sentences. Jordan had been proud of it. Jordan had shown it to his father privately, in his father's home office, after dinner one Sunday, with the small held-breath of a seven-year-old showing a parent something he had made.

Jordan's father had read it in the office. Jordan's father had said *Jordan. This is sweet*. Jordan's father had patted Jordan on the head. Then, at the next big family dinner — a Thanksgiving with grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins — Jordan's father had, in a kind of jovial mood, gotten up and said *you have to hear what Jordan wrote, it is hilarious*. And Jordan's father had read the story out loud, with affectionate exaggeration of the bad spellings, doing voices, while the table laughed.

The table had laughed at the story.

The table had also laughed at Jordan. Or at least — and this is the crucial seven-year-old's perception — Jordan had not, in the moment, been able to tell the difference. The laughter had felt like one undifferentiated laughter. The seven-year-old Jordan had laughed along, because the seven-year-old Jordan had figured out, immediately, that laughing along was the only

available script. Crying, in front of the whole family, would have been the worse option. Laughing was the option that the room allowed.

Jordan had laughed.

Then Jordan, after dinner, had gone to his room, and gotten the notebook with the story in it, and torn the four pages out, and torn the four pages up, and thrown them in the trash.

Jordan had not written a story he was proud of for the next five years. He had written things. He had read philosophy. He had read fiction. He had absorbed sentences and admired sentences. But he had not — until late October of seventh grade, in a notebook he had been keeping with Dr. Pam's gentle encouragement — written a single story that he had been willing to think of as his.

The Thanksgiving moment had been, in some real way, the moment that had built the load-bearing funny. Jordan, from age seven onward, had learned that the version of him the table laughs *at* is safer to be than the version of him the table is moved *by*. The funny was the costume. The writer was — Jordan had decided, at seven, without anyone telling him to — the writer was the part you did not show.

The writer had been hidden under the bed for five years.

In mid-February, during the Letter of Release week, Jordan had sat down to write a letter. He had not known, at the start, who the letter was going to be to. He had thought maybe a kid who had teased him in fourth grade. Maybe a coach. Maybe one of the substitutes. But when his pen had touched the paper, the first word he had written, without thinking, was *Dad*.

He had stared at the word for ten minutes.

Then he had written the letter.

The letter had taken three sittings, across three days.

In Section One — *what you did* — Jordan had described the Thanksgiving moment.

In Section Two — *what it cost me* — Jordan had described the five years of not writing what he wanted to write, of having a Mask that was load-bearing, of having a writer-self that lived under the bed in a notebook he showed no one.

In Section Three — *what I am putting down* — Jordan had written: *I am putting down the version of you that read the story out loud. I am putting down the small bracing I have done every time you have asked me to show you something I have made. I am putting down the assumption that if I show you something, it will end up being shared. I am putting it down. I am twelve. You are forty-three. The Thanksgiving you is not the only you. I have known the other you. I am going to start trusting the other you.*

In Section Four — *what I am keeping* — Jordan had written: *I am keeping the knowledge that I love writing. I am keeping the notebook under my bed. I am keeping Dr. Pam, who has been with me through this. I am keeping the cohort, who knows about pieces of this and who has, in their cohort way, been the audience the family was supposed to be. I am keeping the writer.*

He had read the letter.

He had not, in the Letter of Release tradition, planned to send it. Then he had changed his mind.

This is, in some real way, against the rules of the exercise — the Letter of Release is not supposed to be sent. The point is the writing, not the receiving. But Jordan had thought about it for two more days, and had decided that his version of the work needed the sending. His father was not unsafe. His father had not, in twelve years, been unsafe. His father had, in the Thanksgiving moment, made a parenting mistake that the

parenting mistake had cost Jordan five years of his writing life. Jordan had decided that he wanted his father to know.

Jordan had gone to Dr. Pam first.

Dr. Pam had said, *Jordan. The exercise is not supposed to be sent. But Jordan – you are old enough to make the call about your own life. Tell me your thinking.*

Jordan had told her.

Dr. Pam had said, *Jordan. If you want to give this to your father, I want to do two things first. One, I want you to read it to me out loud, so I can hear how it lands and you can hear yourself. Two, I want you to think about what you want him to do with it. Do you want him to apologize? Do you want him to read it and not respond? Do you want a conversation? You need to know your own request before you hand him the letter.*

Jordan had read it to her.

Dr. Pam had – at one point, gently – wiped one eye.

She had said, when he was done, *Jordan. The letter is good. The letter is – the letter is, in fact, very good. I think you can give it to him. What do you want from him?*

Jordan had thought for a long minute.

He had said, *Dr. Pam. I want him to read it. I want him to know that the Thanksgiving thing was a real thing. I do not need a big apology. I would like – I would like for him to read it and then sit down and ask me about my writing. That is what I want. I want him to ask. Not because he saw a notebook on the floor. Because he read the letter and he wants to know.*

Dr. Pam had said, *Jordan. That is a clear request. Can you put that in the letter, at the very end, in a small post-script?*

Jordan had said yes.

He had written a post-script.

Dad. I am going to give you this letter. I do not need a long response. I do not need a big apology. What I would like – when

you have read it – is for you to come find me and ask me about what I am writing now. Just ask. That is what I want. – J.

He had given it to his father on a Saturday morning, in the kitchen, with nobody else around.

He had said, *Dad. I wrote this. Can you read it.*

His father had read it.

His father, when he was done, had not said anything for a long minute.

Then his father had said, *Jordan. The Thanksgiving thing. I want to – I want to ask if I can take a couple of hours and write you something back. And then come find you and ask you about your writing. Both. The reading was – Jordan. I did not know.*

Jordan had said, *that is okay. Take the time.*

His father had taken the time.

That afternoon, Jordan's father had come into Jordan's room with a piece of paper and had sat on the edge of the bed and had said: *Jordan. The Thanksgiving thing was – I was being affectionate, in the way I thought parents are affectionate, in front of my own parents. I was not seeing you. I was performing being-your-dad, for the older generation. I did not know – I had no idea – what it was going to cost you. I should have known. I have been your dad for twelve years. I should have known that a kid who hands you a notebook in private has handed you a thing that is not for the table. I am – Jordan. I am sorry.*

He had paused.

He had said, *now. Tell me about what you are writing.*

Jordan had cried, briefly, and then had told him.

They had talked for an hour.

Jordan, that night, had – for the first time in five years – read his father a short story, voluntarily, with the door open.

His father had listened. His father had not interrupted.

His father had said, when Jordan was done, *Jordan. That is good. That is — Jordan, I would like to read more, if you would like to share more. I am also going to wait to be invited. The notebook is yours.*

Jordan had said, *thanks Dad.*

This is what a Letter of Release can do, in the version where the person is not unsafe, and the relationship is worth the repair, and the kid does the careful work of figuring out their own request before sending.

This is not what most Letters of Release do. Most are not sent. Most do their work entirely interiorly. But this is what some of them do, in some cases, when the kid is twelve and has a therapist and a cohort and a school that has been preparing them for this work since first grade.

The cohort, the next week, was watching Jordan be slightly different. They could not have named the difference. They had noticed, in some way they did not articulate, that Jordan's funny was — by an order of magnitude that was hard to measure — less load-bearing. The funny was still there. Jordan, in second period social studies, was still doing the British accent thing. But the funny had — and Marcus, in the cohort group chat, would say this in late March in a single line — *the funny seems like a thing he is choosing now, not a thing he is hiding behind.*

That sentence is, in some real way, what the architecture of grace is for.

The Mask is optional.

The writer is also Jordan.

Both can be true.



The cohort, by mid-March, is at the end of Part Three.

If you walked into Room 36 the second week of March, you would see anchor charts now numbering eleven. *Impact ≠ Intent. The Repair Shape. Forgiveness ≠ Trust. The Letter of Release.* Four more, joining the seven from Parts One and Two.

The Mistake Wall in the hallway has a hundred and sixty-one cards on it now.

Mr. Patel has not collected anything in the year that has made him as proud as the cohort he is currently teaching.

He does not say this out loud to the cohort.

He says it to Ms. Calloway in the teachers' lounge on a Tuesday afternoon at 3:45 p.m. Ms. Calloway, who has known this cohort since first grade, nods. Ms. Calloway says, *they have been getting ready. They are using everything we built. Wait until April. They are going to surprise you.*

Mr. Patel says, Ms. Calloway. *They have already surprised me.*

Ms. Calloway says, *I know. They are about to do it again.*

April is the start of Part Four.

The architecture is almost up.

PART FOUR



Grace & The Inner Wiring

*Given everything I now know — what kind
of person am I choosing to become?*

April. May. June. The year closes.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Charitable Interpretation

In the first week of April, Theo did something Theo had been doing for a long time, only this time he had a name for it.

The thing Theo did was choose the charitable interpretation of a moment in the hallway between fourth and fifth period.

Here is what happened.

Theo was at his locker. A boy named Cole, who is in Theo's grade but not in the cohort, walked past Theo on his way to fifth period. As Cole walked past, Cole said — in a voice that could have meant anything — *Theo. Looking good today, buddy.*

The sentence had not been delivered in a kind tone, exactly. It had also not been delivered in an unkind tone, exactly. It had been delivered in the kind of flat affect that twelve-year-old boys sometimes use, the kind of voice where the meaning is — and this is genuinely true — not determinable from the audio alone.

Theo had two interpretations available to him in real time.

Interpretation A. Cole was being friendly. Cole had noticed Theo's new haircut, which Theo had gotten on Saturday, and which had been, by Theo's own assessment, a slightly more daring haircut than his usual. Cole was complimenting it. The *buddy* at the end was just Cole-being-Cole.

Interpretation B. Cole was being sarcastic. Cole had noticed Theo's new haircut and was mocking it. *Looking good* was

sarcasm. *Buddy* was condescension. The whole sentence was a small dig that Theo was supposed to feel without being able to formally object to.

Both interpretations were possible. Both were consistent with the audio. Theo could not, in real time, with the available evidence, distinguish between them.

Theo, having spent seventh grade getting better at noticing his own internal moves, did a thing he could not have done a year ago. He noticed himself reaching for Interpretation B.

The reaching for Interpretation B was — and Theo could feel this — the script working. The script in Theo's head — *I am the one who watches, I am not the protagonist* — predicted that anybody talking to him in a flat tone was probably making fun of him. The script had a long history of being right just often enough that the script had trained itself, over years, to assume B.

Theo, in the hallway, mid-step, paused.

He said in his head, *I am reaching for B. I do not, actually, have evidence for B. I have a flat-affect sentence from Cole, with two possible interpretations, and I am picking the worse one because my script tells me to.*

He thought, for a half-second, *what would A look like.*

A would look like: *thanks Cole. The haircut is new. I have been a little nervous about it.*

He said it.

He said, *thanks Cole. The haircut is new. I have been a little nervous about it.*

Cole stopped walking. Cole turned around.

Cole said — and the tone had now updated, because Cole had received information from Theo's response — Cole said, *Theo, it looks good. I mean it. My mom got me a haircut on*

Saturday too and I have been hiding from it. Yours actually works.

Theo said, *oh. Thanks.*

Cole said, *all right. Fifth period.*

Cole walked away.

Theo stood at his locker for one extra second.

He thought, I almost went into fifth period believing Cole was making fun of me. The whole rest of my day would have been a slightly worse day. The interpretation cost me nothing to switch. The switch changed the entire shape of the next six hours.

This is the lesson of Chapter Eighteen.



There is a phrase we are going to give you for this. The phrase is **charitable interpretation**.

Charitable interpretation is the practice of, when a piece of evidence is ambiguous — when somebody's tone could be neutral or could be hostile, when somebody's text could be friendly or could be cool, when somebody's facial expression could be tired or could be disappointed in you — picking the kindest available interpretation that is consistent with the evidence.

You do not pick the most flattering interpretation. You do not pick the most delusional one. You pick the kindest one that is consistent with the data.

In Cole's case, the data was: a flat-affect sentence saying *Theo, looking good today, buddy*. The kindest interpretation consistent with the data was *Cole noticed the haircut and was complimenting it*. That was a perfectly reasonable interpretation. The hostile interpretation — *Cole was being sarcastic* — was also consistent with the data, but it was no

more supported than the kind one. Both interpretations had the same evidence behind them. Theo could have picked either.

The script told Theo to pick the hostile one. The script was using the data selectively. The script was applying a heavier weight to *consistent with hostility* than to *consistent with kindness*, because the script's job was to keep Theo defended.

Charitable interpretation is the practice of noticing the script and overriding it on purpose when the evidence allows.

This is not about being naive. This is not about always assuming the best of everybody. People do, in fact, sometimes mean the hostile thing. People do, in fact, sometimes make fun of you. The data sometimes clearly supports the hostile interpretation, and in those cases, you do not have to pretend it does not. Charitable interpretation is not denial. Charitable interpretation is what you do when the evidence is genuinely ambiguous.

Most middle-school interactions are genuinely ambiguous. A tone could be anything. A look could be anything. A text could be anything. The evidence, most of the time, is not enough to determine intent. When the evidence is not enough, you have to pick. You always have to pick. Your nervous system will pick for you, automatically, based on your scripts, if you do not make the picking conscious.

Charitable interpretation is the practice of making the picking conscious, and picking the kinder one when the evidence allows.



A note about the cost-benefit.

The cost of charitable interpretation, when you are wrong, is low. If Cole had, in fact, been being sarcastic, and Theo had

responded to Interpretation A — *thanks Cole, the haircut is new, I have been nervous about it* — the worst-case scenario is that Cole would have not updated, would have continued his sarcastic tone, and Theo would have realized within ten seconds that the interpretation had been wrong. Then Theo could update. The update is fast and easy. The cost of having tried A first is, in real terms, ten seconds of social awkwardness.

The cost of uncharitable interpretation, when you are wrong, is high. If Theo had picked B and Cole had actually been being kind, then Theo would have responded coldly or defensively, and Cole would have walked away thinking *Theo is moody*, and the friendship — or the potential friendship — would have suffered, and Theo would have spent the rest of the day in a slightly worse mood, and the whole interaction would have been net-negative.

The asymmetry is real. The cost of being wrong in the charitable direction is small. The cost of being wrong in the uncharitable direction is large.

Mathematicians would tell you: when the costs are asymmetric, you should bias toward the side with the lower cost of being wrong. The math says: pick charitable. When in doubt. As a default. Because the cost of being wrong is much smaller.

This is also, in some real way, the underlying logic of grace. Grace is the practice of extending something generous to somebody who has not earned it. Grace is, in some real way, the behavioral version of charitable interpretation. When the data is ambiguous, when the evidence is not enough, when the person has done a thing that might have been hostile or might have been clumsy — grace says: *assume clumsy. Behave as if the clumsy interpretation is true. See what happens.* You will,

sometimes, be wrong. The person, sometimes, will have meant the hostile thing. You will, in those cases, find out within a short time, and you can update.

But most of the time, the kind interpretation is correct, or close enough to correct that the difference does not matter. And the consistent practice of picking kindness, in a life full of these ambiguous interactions, has effects that compound. You build, around yourself, a field of small kindnesses extended to ambiguous people. The field changes the people. The people who, in your presence, are treated as if they meant the kind thing — those people, surprisingly often, become the kind version of themselves. Not always. Not for the genuinely cruel. But for the large middle of humanity, which is mostly clumsy and tired and self-absorbed and not really thinking about you — for that middle, your charitable interpretations are a small daily kindness that the world is, in some real way, better with than without.

This is — and we are going to say it loudly — not about being a doormat. We are going to spend the next chapter on the difference. Charitable interpretation does not require you to absorb harm. It does not require you to extend grace to people who are actively hurting you. It is a default for ambiguous data, not a rule for clearly hostile data. But the default matters. The default is what your nervous system does, every day, hundreds of times, in interactions where you have not consciously chosen. The default, if you do not work on it, will be whatever your scripts have written for you.

Most people's scripts default uncharitable. Most people, when in doubt, assume the hostile interpretation, because their scripts are protecting them from past harms.

The work of seventh grade, and eighth, and high school, and adulthood, is to adjust the default. To get your nervous

system, slowly, over many small daily practices, to bias toward charitable when the evidence is genuinely ambiguous.

Theo, in the hallway in April, made one small adjustment. The adjustment cost him nothing. The adjustment changed the rest of his day.

That is the practice. One small interaction at a time. Conscious. Deliberate. Until the default updates.

Try it tomorrow. With one person. Where the evidence is ambiguous. Pick the kinder interpretation. See what happens.

You can do this. You are old enough.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Small Acts (The Grace Challenge)

In the third week of April, Mr. Patel announced something called the Grace Challenge.

It worked like this. For seven days, each kid in Room 36 picked one small act of grace per day. They did it. They wrote it down, in their journal, that night. At the end of the week, the class — not the teacher — talked about what happened.

The acts had to meet three criteria.

One. Small enough that you will actually do it.

Two. Specific enough that you will know whether you did it.

Three. Costs you something — even a small something.

A few rules.

Saying hi to somebody you already say hi to does not count. That is not grace. That is your normal life.

Doing an act of grace that you immediately tell five people about does not count. The whole structure of grace is that it is not transactional. If you do it for the credit, you have not done it for grace — you have done it for credit. Credit is a different system.

Doing the same act every day for seven days does not count. The point is the range — easy, medium, hard. The point is the practice of noticing, in your real life, where the opportunities are.

The cohort, of course, did this challenge. Mia, in Pittsburgh, did it too, because Sofia called her on Monday night and asked if she wanted to do it in parallel, and Mia said yes immediately. The cohort, by the end of the week, had ten parallel weeks of small grace happening in two cities.

Mr. Patel had said, at the start of the week, *friends. The other twenty-three kids in this room are also doing this. The cohort is not the only group doing the Challenge. This is a Room 36 thing. I want to be clear – the Challenge is private in the sense that you are not collecting credit, and public in the sense that we are going to talk about it on Friday. Both. The talking on Friday is for the noticing, not for the credit. Notice your own week. Notice each other's.*

The cohort did the week.

Here is what they did.



Maya offered to help her younger brother with his math homework on Tuesday. He had been struggling with fractions. He had cried about it on Monday. Maya — who had spent most of seventh grade in too much shame about her own math to even look at her brother's homework — pulled out a chair next to him on Tuesday, and helped him with three problems, and did not roll her eyes once, even though he asked the same question four times. The act took twenty minutes. Her brother gave her a hug afterwards that she will, for the rest of her life, remember.

Sofia ate lunch with a girl named Megan on Wednesday. Megan was a girl who had been new to the school in January, and who had been struggling to find a lunch table. Sofia did not announce the lunch to anybody. She just got her tray and walked past the cohort table, did a small wave at Marcus that

meant *I am doing something, do not save me a seat*, and sat down at Megan's table. They were the only two people at the table for the first ten minutes, until two of Megan's tenuous-acquaintances came over. Megan, when she realized that Sofia had chosen to sit there, said *thanks for coming over* in a very quiet voice. Sofia said *of course. I should have done it in January. I am sorry I did not*. Megan said *it is okay*. They sat together for the rest of lunch. Sofia did the same thing on Friday. The cohort table noticed. The cohort table did not say anything. The cohort, in the cohort way, understood.

Kezia texted her grandmother on Sunday night. Just a *hi Grandma, I love you*, knowing her grandmother might not know who Kezia was when she got the text, knowing her grandmother might not respond at all. Kezia did not know whether her grandmother saw it. She sent it anyway. Grace does not require the receipt of grace to be grace. On Wednesday, Kezia's mom told Kezia that her grandmother had, in fact, seen the text, and had asked Kezia's mom who Kezia was, and Kezia's mom had said *that is your granddaughter, Mom*, and Kezia's grandmother had said *oh, that lovely girl, tell her I love her too*. Kezia's mom told Kezia this on Wednesday at dinner. Kezia cried at the table briefly. The crying was not sad. The crying was Kezia letting the gap close one more inch.

Marcus wrote a paragraph apology to the two kids whose private text he had screenshotted in June. He had not, until the Grace Challenge, ever apologized to them directly. He had, by the September Wall card, done the public-private acknowledgment. He had not done the direct one. He wrote the paragraph on Monday night. He gave it to the two kids on Tuesday at school. The two kids — who, it turned out, had been more annoyed than hurt by the screenshot, and who had, by April, mostly forgotten about it — read the paragraph, and

one of them said *Marcus. Thank you. We are good.* The other one said *Marcus. Thank you. It is fine. I appreciate this.* Marcus walked away with something genuine that the Wall card had not given him — the direct repair. The Wall card had been the private acknowledgment. The paragraph had been the interpersonal repair. Both, it turned out, had been needed.

Darius did the dishes on Thursday, without being asked, even though it was not his night. His mother walked into the kitchen and stared at him. She did not say anything. She just nodded, slowly, in the way mothers do when they see a thing they were not expecting and have decided not to make a thing of it. Darius walked past her and said *love you, Ma.* He did not used to say that. He says it now. He has said it most nights since the Imani thing in September. The dishes-on-Thursday were one small additional act in a year that has been, in some real way, Darius's making it up to the family year. The family knows. The family is — and Darius's mother told him this once, on a Saturday morning in April, holding a cup of coffee — *the family is, baby, the family is healing too.*

Jordan — and this is the surprise — gave a copy of *Meditations* to Marcus, with a note inside that said *Marcus. I read this one a lot. Thought you might like it. We can talk about it if you want.* — J. Marcus read the note twice. He looked at Jordan in a way Jordan had never been looked at before — seen, exactly, in the place where he had been hiding the writer-reading-philosophy version of himself since fifth grade. Marcus said *yeah, man, of course we can talk about it.* That was the entire conversation. It changed the shape of their friendship. They have been, since that day, the cohort's book pair — the two of them have been reading the same book at the same time, in some weeks, and texting each other small thoughts about it. The cohort, by June, will be aware of this.

The cohort, by June, will tease Marcus and Jordan about it gently. Marcus and Jordan, by June, will tease back, and the teasing will be of the kind that is, in the cohort's coded language, love.

Amara told one person — a girl named Lola, in her science class, who Amara had been getting to know slowly across the spring — the actual story of moving from Houston, with the original spelling of her name, and what it had cost her to bury both. She said all three syllables of Amara out loud, to Lola, for the first time at Lincoln Park Middle School outside of cohort spaces. Lola listened. At the end Lola said, *Amara. That is the prettiest version of your name. I like it.* From that day forward, around Lola at least, Amara was Amara again. Three syllables. Soft at the end.

Priya asked Hannah, her best friend outside the cohort, if Hannah wanted to come to the cohort's basement gathering at Sofia's on the next Saturday. The cohort basement gatherings had been, for many years, a closed thing — the cohort plus immediate family only, by long-standing tradition. Priya had cleared it with Sofia first. Sofia had said *yes, of course, bring Hannah.* The cohort, that Saturday, made room for Hannah. Hannah did not, by one Saturday, become a cohort member — the cohort takes years to fully fold somebody in — but Hannah was welcomed, and Hannah understood the welcoming, and Priya, who had been carrying the small worry that Hannah and the cohort were going to remain forever separate worlds, watched the two worlds get one degree closer. The closing of the gap, Priya noted in her journal, was another version of the gap-closing work Kezia has been doing all year. The gap between her two worlds was, by April, one degree smaller.

Theo told the cohort, in the cohort group chat on Saturday morning, *I have been tired this year. I told Marcus a while ago. I*

am telling all of you now. I do not need anything specific. I am just — I am telling you because the cohort needs to know. The cohort group chat lit up. Sofia: Theo. Thank you. We know. We love you. Amara: Theo. I have been waiting. I am here. Maya: Theo. Can I draw you something. Just a small thing. Theo: Maya. Yes. Maya drew Theo a small picture — Theo in the cohort booth at Mason's diner, sitting between Marcus and Sofia, with his feet up on the cohort bench. The picture said, at the bottom, *the cohort carries the watcher too.* Theo kept the picture. He still has it. It is in his desk drawer in 2034. He looks at it sometimes.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, did her parallel week. She did not do all seven the way the Lincoln Park kids did — her week was a little different, because Mia was working in her own Pittsburgh life with her own Pittsburgh challenges. She did three. She called her grandfather in Florida, who she had not called in two months. She invited her newest Pittsburgh friend over for a Saturday that Mia would have, in another version of the year, kept to herself. And she wrote a card to Sofia — an actual paper card, in the mail — that said, in Mia's handwriting, *Sof. The cohort is the cohort even when one of us is in Pittsburgh. You are my person. Thank you for being patient about the distance.* Sofia received the card on Wednesday. Sofia put it on her bedroom mirror.



Mr. Patel did not ask the cohort to report any of this in class. The reporting day was for the whole Room 36, not just the cohort. On Friday, when the class talked about the week, several hands went up.

One kid said: *I noticed that the small ones were the easiest, but the medium ones changed something.*

Another kid said: *I noticed I wanted credit for them, and I had to stop myself from telling people. And when I did not tell anybody, the act felt different. It felt more like mine.*

Another kid — and this one will be quoted by Mr. Patel for the rest of his career — said: *I noticed that grace makes you feel different than you expected. I thought it would feel like I was being a good person. It actually just felt like I was being more myself. Like the kind of person I wanted to be when I was little.*

Mr. Patel wrote that one on the board. **The kind of person I wanted to be when I was little.**

He underlined it.

He said, *friends. That sentence is the entire curriculum. That sentence is what the floor and the walls and the wiring were for. That sentence — the recognition that grace is not a performance of goodness, but a return to the self that you suspected, all along, was the real one — is the moment the architecture starts feeling like a home.*

He paused.

You can do the Grace Challenge again. You can do it every week, if you want. You can do it the rest of your life. Pick the seven acts. Keep them small. Keep them specific. Keep them yours. See what happens.

The bell rang.

The cohort walked out.

Maya, in the hallway, walked next to Mr. Patel for a few steps. Maya said, Mr. Patel.

Mr. Patel said, Maya.

Maya said, *I think — I think I am going to do it again next week.*

Mr. Patel said, Maya. *The architecture is yours now. Use it whenever you want. I cannot ask anybody to do this. You can, however, ask yourself.*

Maya said, *okay*.

She walked away.

She did, in fact, do the Grace Challenge again the next week. And the week after that. And — though we do not get to follow her past this book — she did versions of it every week of high school. The small-acts framework, in some real way, became the spine of how Maya organized her own kindness for the rest of her life.

That is what the Grace Challenge does, when it works.

It is not a lesson. It is a habit.

The habit can be yours.

Pick the seven acts. Start tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Grace With Hard People

We have to draw a line in this chapter, and we have to draw it carefully, because the line we are drawing has not always been drawn well in books like this one, and the failure to draw it has hurt people.

The line is between difficult and unsafe.

A difficult person is irritating, challenging, hard to be around. A difficult person rolls their eyes when you talk in class. A difficult person is the family member who corrects everything you say. A difficult person is the friend who is going through something and is being a worse friend than usual. A difficult person is the teacher who plays favorites and you are not the favorite. A difficult person is the loud kid in the back row who, every day, derails the lesson you are actually interested in.

Grace toward difficult people is, for most of us, possible. Hard, but possible. That is what this curriculum has been preparing you for.

An unsafe person is something else entirely. An unsafe person is somebody whose presence in your life puts your physical, emotional, or psychological wellbeing at active risk. An unsafe person is the person who hits. The person who threatens. The person whose anger is unpredictable and explosive. The person who gets into your head in a way that

makes you smaller every week. The person around whom you cannot bring yourself — your real self — without consequence.

We are saying the next sentence loudly, because it is important: **Grace is not required toward unsafe people. Ever. Not in this curriculum. Not in any curriculum that means well.**

If a book asks you to extend grace toward somebody who is genuinely harming you, that book is failing you. If a teacher asks you to be the bigger person toward somebody whose presence in your life is a danger to you, that teacher is — even with the best intentions — getting it wrong. The work of grace is for you, in service of the kind of person you want to become. Grace turned into a duty to absorb harm is no longer grace. It is something else, and it has a different name, and the name is self-erasure.

You are allowed to leave situations that are unsafe. You are allowed to ask for help. You are allowed to refuse the framework of grace when the framework would require you to stay near somebody who is hurting you.

The architecture of grace assumes you, the architect, are still standing. If your safety is at risk, the architecture stops, and safety becomes the only chapter.

If anybody in your life is making you unsafe — at home, at school, online, anywhere — the right response is not grace. The right response is to tell a trusted adult. Your school counselor. A teacher. A coach. A relative. The 988 Lifeline if you do not know who else to tell. Help exists. Use it. There is no version of this book that asks you to swallow danger in the name of growth.



That said. That said.

Most of the people we have to learn to extend grace to are not unsafe. Most of them are just difficult. And there is a particular kind of grace, for the difficult-but-not-unsafe, that is one of the most demanding practices in the whole curriculum.

Priya is in math class with a kid named Owen who eye-rolls every time she talks.

Every. Single. Time. Priya raises her hand, gets called on, says her answer — and Owen, in her peripheral vision, makes a face. He does not say anything out loud. He has been careful about that. He just makes the face. Sometimes he sighs. Sometimes he mutters something to the kid next to him, who laughs.

This is not unsafe. Priya is not in danger from Owen. Priya could, if she chose, ignore him completely and the worst he would do is — eye-roll at her at a slightly higher rate.

It is, however, difficult. It costs her something every single class period. By March, Priya was raising her hand less. By the start of April, her contribution had dropped by half. By mid-April, she had stopped trying to say anything in math at all, and the cost of Owen's daily face was being paid not by Owen — Owen was fine, Owen was having a great year — but by every kid in math class who would have benefited from Priya's contributions, including, especially, Priya herself.

What does grace look like here?

It does not look like absorbing the eye-roll quietly forever. That is not grace. That is, again, a kind of self-erasure. The Compassionate Witness from Part Two would not co-sign Priya disappearing from her own math class to avoid Owen's face.

It also does not look like publicly humiliating Owen in retaliation. Retaliation is just rumor-style harm in a different

costume.

What grace looks like, here, is something more interior.

It looks like Priya, on a Wednesday in late April, making the following private decision:

Owen is a difficult person. He is not a dangerous one. The face he is making is information about him, not information about me. I am going to keep raising my hand. I am not going to perform that I do not notice him — I do notice him. I am also not going to retaliate, or report him, or make him a project. I am going to grant him the grace of not being the protagonist of my math class. I am going to be the protagonist of my math class.

That is grace-from-self-respect. It is a posture, internal, that keeps Priya in her own life without making Owen's behavior the center of it.

Priya raised her hand the next day. She gave her answer. Owen made the face. Priya, on purpose, did not look at him. She looked at the teacher. She finished her sentence. She sat down.

The next class, she did it again.

The next class, she did it again.

By the end of the week, Owen had stopped — and this is the surprise — Owen had stopped doing the face. He had not stopped because Priya had confronted him. He had stopped because the face was no longer eliciting a reaction. The face had been, in some real way, a bid. When the bid was no longer being answered, the bid lost its function.

The cohort, the next Tuesday at lunch, would note this with Priya. Sofia would say *Pri*. Owen *has stopped*. Priya would say yes. Sofia would say *Pri*. You *did the thing*. Priya would say *I did the thing*. It was so much smaller than I thought it would be. I just — I just kept raising my hand. And he ran out of fuel.

That is what grace toward a difficult-but-not-unsafe person looks like, in middle school. It is not absorbing. It is not retaliating. It is continuing to be yourself, in front of them, in the most boring possible way, until they get bored.

That works, more often than you would think.



Sometimes — and this is the harder version — grace toward a difficult person looks like grace at a distance.

You are not going to repair the relationship. You are not going to be friends. You are not, even, going to like them. You are simply going to want good things for them, in a generic, almost abstract way, while keeping your distance from them.

I want good things for you without wanting to be close to you again.

That sentence is — and most teenagers do not encounter it until much later in life — one of the most freeing sentences a human being can say. It releases you from the false binary of *either I love you or I hate you*. There is a third option, which is *I wish you well from over here*. It is grace, exercised at a distance, as a kind of generosity that does not require proximity.

Think about who, in your life, that sentence might apply to. It might be a kid who teased you in fifth grade who is now in your seventh-grade homeroom. It might be a former best friend who hurt you in sixth grade. It might be a cousin who, every Christmas, says something that lands wrong. It might be a coach you used to have. It might be — and this is the harder version — it might be a family member who has not been safe in the past and who you have, with the help of trusted adults, kept at a deliberate distance from.

For all of them, the sentence is the same.

I want good things for you without wanting to be close to you again.

It will, for most of you, take you a few years to fully be able to say it about anybody. That is fine. The point is to know the sentence exists, so that when you are ready — at fifteen, at twenty, at thirty-five — you have already met the sentence.

You met it here. In April. In seventh grade.

That is early. That is good.



A final note about grace.

Grace is not a performance.

Grace is not a thing you do so other people will say you are a good person. Grace is not a thing you do because the curriculum told you to. Grace is not a thing you do to prove anything.

Grace is, in some real way, the behavior of a person who has built the floor and the walls and the wiring of this architecture and who now, having built it, has something to give that does not require somebody to earn it. The giving is the natural extension of the building. The person who has built the architecture is, in some real way, generous by default, because the architecture itself produces generosity. There is no scarcity inside a well-built architecture. There is room for a little extra. That is what we have been building.

That is why grace comes at the end of the curriculum, not the beginning.

You cannot extend grace if you have not built the floor. You cannot extend grace if you have not built the walls. You cannot extend grace if the wiring — the empathy, the forgiveness, the impact-vs-intent, the Letter of Release — is not in.

You have built the floor. You have built the walls. The wiring is in. The grace is the natural product of the architecture.

The architecture is yours.

Carry it.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mia Comes Home

In the third week of May, Mia came to Lincoln Park for a long weekend.

She had not been in Lincoln Park since Christmas. The Christmas visit had been short — three days, the cohort in and out of Sofia's basement, Mia in her grandmother's old room at her uncle's house. The Christmas visit had felt, to Mia and to the cohort, like a small reset. It had also felt — and Mia had told Sofia this on the phone in January — like not enough.

The May visit was different. The May visit was four days. The May visit had been planned, by Mia and her mother, to give Mia real cohort time. Not three days. Not a frantic Christmas. Four days where Mia could be in the cohort lunch table, in Sofia's basement, in Marcus's kitchen, in the booth at Mason's diner, in the small hallway outside Room 36 where the Mistake Wall lived.

Mia arrived on a Thursday afternoon.

Sofia picked her up at the bus station with her mom. The hug, at the bus station, was the kind of hug Sofia and Mia had been giving each other since they were nine — the kind where neither one of them speaks for the first ten seconds, because the speaking would interrupt the physical fact of being in the same air again.

Sofia said, into Mia's shoulder, *Mi*.

Mia said, into Sofia's shoulder, *Sof*.

Sofia's mom, watching them, did the small parent-face that meant *I am pretending not to cry*.

They drove home.



Friday morning, Mr. Patel let Mia come to Room 36 as a guest. The cohort had cleared this with Mr. Patel two weeks in advance. Mr. Patel had said yes immediately.

Mia had been, in the cohort's narrative, the tenth member who is in Pittsburgh for so long that Mr. Patel had been, in his own way, looking forward to meeting her properly. He had heard about her for nine months. He had read her name in cohort kids' journals — when journals had been shareable — and he had heard the cohort reference her in class. The cohort, when they mentioned Mia, did so in a way Mr. Patel had not quite encountered before. The cohort talked about Mia the way you talk about a sister who lives in another city. Present-tense. Constant. Not absent.

Mr. Patel, when Mia walked into Room 36 with Sofia on Friday morning, stood up.

He said, *Mia*.

Mia said, *Mr. Patel*.

Mr. Patel said, *Mia. Welcome to Room 36*.

He gestured to a chair. Mia sat down. Sofia sat next to her. The other cohort kids in second period — Marcus, Theo, Priya, Amara — were already in their seats. The non-cohort kids in the room were curious. Most of them had heard about Mia. Maddie, the girl Amara had befriended in September, did a small wave. Mia waved back.

Mr. Patel said, *friends. We are doing a Grace Audit today. Mia is here as a guest. Mia, do you know what a Grace Audit is.*

Mia said, Mr. Patel. Sofia has told me about everything you have done this year. I think I know.

Mr. Patel said, Mia. Then you are an honorary auditor today.

He picked up a marker. He wrote on the board: **THE GRACE AUDIT.**

He said:

Friends. Here is the assignment. For the next twenty-four hours, walk around your school – the hallways, the cafeteria, the locker rooms, the classrooms, the parking lot, the bus loop – with one specific question in your head:

He paused. He wrote: **Where, in this building, is grace noticeably absent?**

That is the Grace Audit. You are not looking for who deserves grace. Everyone deserves it; that is not the question. You are looking for a specific gap – a place, in the school environment, where the absence of grace is making somebody's daily experience harder than it has to be. A small gap. A real gap. One you have evidence for.

He paused.

Then – and this is the second part – I want you to think about what, if anything, you could do about the gap. Not a grand intervention. A small, specific, twelve-year-old-sized act. The kind of act that the Grace Challenge already trained you to do.

He sat down.

You have until Monday. Mia is going to do this with us. Mia, you get the cohort's audit. The cohort meets at Sofia's basement Sunday afternoon. You all bring what you noticed.

The cohort nodded.

Mia, in the chair, was smiling.

She said, later, to Sofia in the hallway after class, Sof. Mr. Patel is – he is what you said he was.

Sofia said, Mi. I know.



Sunday afternoon, the cohort gathered in Sofia's basement.

All ten of them. Mia in person for the first time at a basement gathering in many months. Theo, Marcus, Priya, Amara, Sofia, Mia, Maya, Darius, Jordan, Kezia. The full cohort in one room.

The basement, on a Sunday afternoon in May, looked like every cohort basement gathering had ever looked. Beanbags. Snacks. A coffee table with everyone's water bottles on it. The cohort dog — Marcus had brought Pepper for the afternoon, because Pepper had taken to coming to cohort gatherings in the last year and the cohort had decided he was a member. Pepper was asleep under the coffee table.

Sofia said, *all right. Audits.*

The cohort went around the circle.

Theo had noticed that the kid who pushed the cleaning cart through the seventh-grade hallway every afternoon — a man named Mr. Ortiz, who had been at Lincoln Park for fifteen years — was almost never spoken to by students. Theo had been, all year, the cohort's most consistent hello-to-Mr.-Ortiz kid, but Theo had also, over the course of the year, watched a lot of seventh-graders walk past Mr. Ortiz with no acknowledgment at all. Theo proposed that the cohort, for the rest of the school year, would just — say hello to Mr. Ortiz when they saw him. Out loud. By name. Theo's small act was: *use his name.* The cohort agreed instantly.

Maya had noticed that the art room — Ms. Henley's room — had a small box of broken pencils on a shelf that had been there for, by Ms. Henley's own admission, two years. The pencils were not sharpenable. They were just — broken pencils, in a box, waiting for something. Maya proposed that

the cohort, on a Saturday morning before the end of the year, would go into the art room with permission and clear out the box and replace it with new pencils that Maya had been collecting from various sources. The small act was: *clear out one stuck box that has been waiting for two years to be cleared.* The cohort agreed.

Sofia had noticed Megan — the girl from January — was still, in May, eating lunch alone on the days the cohort had different schedules. Sofia proposed that the cohort, for the rest of the year, would rotate Megan into the cohort lunch table on Tuesdays. The cohort agreed. Sofia had cleared this in advance with Megan; Megan had said yes carefully. The cohort, on the upcoming Tuesday, would have eleven people at the table.

Priya had noticed that Hannah — who was now, by Priya's careful spring work, friendlier with the cohort than she had ever been — had nobody at her birthday party last year. Hannah's birthday was in June. Priya proposed that the cohort would, this year, go. All ten of them. The small act was: *show up to Hannah's birthday party.* The cohort agreed.

Marcus had noticed that the kids whose private text he had screenshotted in June — the two kids he had apologized to during the Grace Challenge — had still, all year, been at a kind of distance from the cohort. They were not in the cohort, but they had been, by Marcus's count, cohort-adjacent for a long time and might, if the cohort made room, be cohort-folded. Marcus proposed that the cohort would invite them to one cohort gathering before the end of the year. The cohort agreed. Sofia said *Marcus, you ask them. You are the right person to ask.* Marcus said *I know.*

Darius had noticed that his cousin — a kid who lived two streets over, who was in the cohort's grade, who had not, for

complicated family reasons, been close to Darius for a few years — had been visibly lonely all year. Darius proposed that he, Darius specifically, would invite his cousin over on Saturday to play basketball. The small act was one Saturday afternoon of basketball with a cousin he had been avoiding. The cohort, in their cohort way, recognized that this was Darius's audit and that the cohort did not, this time, need to participate. Darius would do it alone.

Jordan had noticed that Mrs. Tomlin — the social studies teacher in second period — had been visibly tired in the last six weeks. Mrs. Tomlin had, in late April, mentioned in passing that her mother was sick. Jordan proposed that he, Jordan specifically, would stop doing the British accent routine for the rest of the year. Not because the routine was hurting Mrs. Tomlin — Mrs. Tomlin loved the routine — but because the routine took energy from her to manage, and not having to manage Jordan's class antics would be, in some real way, grace toward a tired teacher. The cohort was a little surprised by this. Marcus said *Jordan. Are you serious.* Jordan said *Marcus. I am serious. The Mask is optional.* Marcus said *Jordan.* And the cohort — and this is the cohort being the cohort — the cohort did not press. The cohort understood. Jordan had been doing the work of seventh grade. Jordan had earned the right to set down the Mask in any room he wanted.

Amara had noticed that Brielle and Cassidy — the two girls Amara had been adjacent to all of sixth grade — had not, in the last two months, had a third friend join their pair. They were a stable two. Amara had, in January, made her peace with Brielle's comment. Amara had — internally — put Brielle down. But Amara had also noticed that Cassidy, in particular, had been alone with Brielle in a way that was visibly costing Cassidy something. Amara proposed that she would, in the last

six weeks of school, re-include Cassidy in some small interactions. Not a friendship reset. Not a return to adjacency. Just — small kindnesses, extended without explanation, that gave Cassidy somebody else to be near. The small act was *extend small kindnesses to Cassidy, without performing them*. The cohort agreed.

Kezia had noticed that her grandmother had been having more bad days than good days. Kezia proposed that, for the rest of the school year, she would visit her grandmother on Sunday afternoons regardless of whether her grandmother knew who Kezia was on any given Sunday. Kezia had been, all year, going to her grandmother's on weekends but had been, sometimes, finding reasons to skip when she suspected it would be a bad day. The audit Kezia was naming was — and the cohort heard this — that she had been protecting herself from the bad days by not going. The grace audit was *go anyway*. The cohort was quiet for a second. Then Marcus said *Kez. Thank you for telling us. We will check on you on Sunday nights*. Kezia said *thank you*.

Mia, in Pittsburgh, had been doing a different audit, because Mia did not have access to Lincoln Park Middle School day-to-day. Mia's audit was about her own school in Pittsburgh — there was a kid in Mia's grade there who reminded Mia of cohort-adjacent kids in Lincoln Park, who Mia had been keeping at arms' length because Mia's energy was, mostly, with the cohort by phone. Mia's audit was: *let the new kid in*. Just one new kid. One Pittsburgh kid who Mia would, over the next month, make actual room for. The cohort agreed without needing to say anything. The cohort understood. Mia was building her own cohort in Pittsburgh, and the Lincoln Park cohort had been, all year, making room for her to do it.



The cohort sat in Sofia's basement for a while after the audits were named.

The conversation drifted. Pepper woke up and demanded attention. Marcus's mother brought down a tray of grilled cheese sandwiches. Maya drew on a paper napkin a picture of all ten of them on a couch — including Mia, in the middle — with the words at the bottom, *Grace Audit, Spring of Seventh Grade*. She tore the napkin off and gave it to Sofia. Sofia put it in a small box she kept under her bed where she had been collecting cohort artifacts for years.

The artifacts, by twelfth grade, will fill three boxes.

But that is later.

Right now, in May of seventh grade, the cohort is in Sofia's basement, and Mia is on the beanbag next to Sofia, and Pepper is awake and being fed grilled cheese crusts, and the Grace Audit has been done, and the cohort has, by the end of the year, each found one place in their environments where the absence of grace was a real cost, and where they could do a small, specific thing to make the absence smaller.

This is what the architecture, fully built, looks like in seventh grade. It looks like ten kids on a Sunday afternoon in May, in a basement in Lincoln Park, planning small acts of kindness with the same seriousness they used to plan basketball games in third grade.

The acts are small. The acts are specific. The acts are theirs. That is the architecture.

That is what we have been building.

— J.A.R.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Last Day

It is the second-to-last day of seventh grade.

The cohort, by the eyes of any reasonable observer, looks like the cohort that walked into Room 36 in September. Same ten kids — nine present, Mia on the cohort's group video call patched in from her Pittsburgh middle school, where her seventh grade has, similarly, just finished. Same Mr. Patel at the front of the room. Same U-shape desks. Same Mistake Wall in the hallway outside, now with over two hundred cards on it, half of them by cohort kids, half by other seventh-graders who had, across the year, started using the Wall the cohort had been showing them how to use.

But the cohort, by the eyes of the cohort, is not the same cohort. The cohort is — and Mr. Patel, in the cohort's June journal week, will write this in his own private journal at home — *the cohort that walked in in September, plus what they built.*

The plus is real. The plus is, in some real way, the architecture.



Mr. Patel did something on the second-to-last day that he had done every year for nineteen years.

He handed back the October letters.

The letters had been in the drawer since the end of Part One. The cohort, this morning, did not remember exactly

what they had written. They remembered the general feeling — they remembered that the letter had been from October-them to May-them — but the specific words had, across nine months, faded from access.

Mr. Patel passed out the envelopes.

He said, *friends. Open them. Read what October-you wrote to May-you. I will give you fifteen minutes. Do not talk. Do not share. Just read.*

The cohort opened the envelopes.

Each kid read what they had written eight months ago.

Amara read: *I hope you have, by May, gotten the cohort-Amara percentage to higher than fifty.* She did the calculation in her head. Cohort-Amara, by May, is — by Amara's honest tally — about seventy percent. Adjacent-Amara is about thirty. The shift has happened. The October-Amara had set the target. The May-Amara had met the target, and exceeded it. Amara stared at the letter for a long minute.

Marcus read: *The Wall is for this. Use it again when you need it.* He had used it three more times. By May, the cohort's Wall card count for Marcus alone was four. The Wall had become, in Marcus's life, exactly what October-Marcus had predicted it would become — the architecture for the things you cannot tell people verbally but can tell in writing in public.

Priya read: *I hope you are less tired. I hope you have figured out how to catch the Critic with less effort.* She thought, reading it, *I am still tired. The catching is faster now. I have not, by May, gotten less tired in any easy way. But the effort the catching takes has dropped by, maybe, sixty percent.* October-Priya had been more optimistic about the energy. May-Priya is more honest. Both are okay.

Theo read: *Route it. Do not carry.* He thought, *I have started routing. I told Marcus. I told Ms. Calloway. I told the cohort in*

April. I have not done all the routing I need to do. But I have been doing it. The carrying has gotten lighter because the cohort has been carrying with me.

Sofia read: *I hope you have, by May, used the script at least once for real. She had used it — by her count, three times. December at the science table. February at a different lunch dynamic with Maddie's group. April at a moment in gym class she had not even, at the time, processed. The script was in her mouth. The script was, by May, automatic.*

Maya read the drawing of the coat. She read the sentence underneath: *I am still figuring out what is underneath. She thought, I am the figure. I have been figuring out, all year. The figure is — the figure is Maya the artist. I did not know that in October. I know it in May.*

Jordan read his letter, which had said *show one story to one cohort kid by May — Marcus, probably. He had not shown a cohort kid yet. He had shown his father. He had decided that the father showing was, in some way, bigger than the cohort showing. The cohort showing was, he had decided, going to be a summer thing. Eighth-grade thing. He would, by August, be ready. He read October-Jordan's note and thought, I am close, October-me. I am close.*

Darius read: *Walk into the room. Always. He had walked into Imani's room three weeks after the kitchen incident. He had walked into many rooms across the year. He had become, by May, a kid who, when he had something to say to somebody, said it. The cohort had noticed this. Aaliyah, his sister, had noticed this. His mother had — once, in March, at the kitchen table, very quietly — said Darius. Whatever they are teaching you this year. Keep doing it.*

Kezia read: *I hope you have, by May, made the phone lighter. She had. The phone, by May, was — by her honest assessment*

— about half the weight it had been in September. Not gone. Not solved. But half. The gap had narrowed. The cohort knew more of her true things. Her grandmother had, by May, mostly stopped knowing who Kezia was when Kezia visited; but Kezia had, in the Grace Audit, committed to visiting anyway, and had been visiting anyway, and the visiting was — even in the worse weeks — grace from Kezia to herself, because Kezia had been showing up for somebody who could no longer keep her own track of the showing up. The cohort had been showing up for Kezia. Kezia had been showing up for her grandmother. The architecture, in this one specific way, was what enabled the showing up.

Mia, on the video screen from Pittsburgh, also read her letter. The cohort had FaceTimed her in. She had written her own October letter privately, in Pittsburgh, on the same Thursday Mr. Patel had assigned it. She had given it to her Pittsburgh school counselor to hold until May. The counselor had given it back the same day Mr. Patel handed Mia's cohort theirs. Mia read it on the screen. Sofia, in Room 36, could see Mia's face on Marcus's phone. Mia was, by the second paragraph, quietly crying. Sofia, in Room 36, was quietly crying too. The cohort, sitting in their U-shape, was — at multiple seats around the room — quietly emotional in the particular way that this exercise tends to produce in kids who have done real work over a long year.

Mr. Patel let the silence sit. Sixty seconds. Ninety. Two minutes.

Then he stood up.



Mr. Patel walked to the front of the room.

He had a stack of index cards in his hand.

He said:

Friends. I am going to do a thing. I have done this thing every year for nineteen years. I am going to do it this year, in this room, with this cohort, with the rest of seventh-grade students at Lincoln Park Middle School also in this room, with Mia on the screen. I am going to name each one of you. Every single person. And I am going to tell you one thing I have watched you grow in this year. This is not optional. Nobody is overlooked. I have prepared these in writing because what I have to say to you matters too much for me to make it up.

He paused.

I am going to start with the cohort, because Mia is on a video call and we need to honor her time. Then I will continue with the rest of the room.

He cleared his throat.

He read:

To Amara: I have watched you, this year, slowly stop performing. I have noticed that the version of you that walks into this room in June is more recognizable to me than the one who walked in in September. Three syllables. Soft at the end. The adjacent version has been getting smaller and the real version has been getting bigger. That is, in some real way, the work this room was designed to do. You did the work. Carry it.

To Jordan: I have watched you, this year, become a kid who is the funny one when he chooses and a kid who is the writer when he chooses, and who has made the choosing a real choice. The Mask of Funny had a long run. The writer underneath has, this year, been allowed out of the bed for the first time. The room is going to miss seventh-grade Jordan a little. The world is going to gain something when you start sharing the writer-Jordan more widely. Both Jordans are okay. You decide which one is in which room. That is — Jordan — that is freedom.

To Maya: In November I watched you not raise your hand for two weeks. In May I watched you walk into Ms. Henley's art room after school, voluntarily, and ask for studio time. That is the entire curriculum, in one walk down a hallway. The label came off. The author wrote a new one. The new one is — the new one is artist. I have seen the sketches. They are good. They are real. Carry the sketchbook everywhere.

To Darius: I have watched you go back to the dinner table. I do not know if anybody in your house knows how hard that was. I know. The Compassionate Witness arrived in your head sometime in October and has, as far as I can tell, decided to stay. Do not let her leave. She is the most important roommate you will ever have.

To Priya: I have watched you, this year, catch the Critic faster every month. The Critic is not gone. She is, by my eye, no quieter than she was in September. The catching is faster. That is what changed. You are the cohort's quiet champion of the Compassionate Witness. The cohort will remind you of this when you forget. — Mr. P.

To Sofia: I have watched you use the script at the science table in December and walk past the cohort table to sit with Megan in April. You are, this year, becoming a person who turns the volume knob on purpose. The cohort is going to need you to keep doing it. The world is going to need you to keep doing it. Volume Five. Always available. Use it.

To Marcus: You put a card on the Wall in September that I have read many times this year. You put three more after. The Wall has been, for you, the architecture you have most fully claimed. I want you to know that the Wall is going with you to high school. Ms. Calloway is moving it to the eighth-grade hallway over the summer. The Wall will be in your life for the

rest of middle school. After that – Marcus, you are going to build a Wall in every room you walk into. The Wall is yours now.

To Kezia: I have watched you, this year, make the phone lighter. The cohort knows pieces of how. I know pieces. Sofia knows the most. Your grandmother – Kezia, your grandmother knows, even on the days she does not remember your name. She knows because the love is the kind that does not require remembering. You have been carrying somebody who has, in some real way, become the version of carrying somebody we do not have a Letter of Release for, because she does not need to be released – she needs to be visited. You have been visiting. That is the work. Keep visiting.

To Theo: I have watched you, this year, route. The watching has not gone away. The watching is, in some real way, what you do. But the routing has come in. You have been routing things to Ms. Calloway and to me and to the cohort. You have stopped carrying everything alone. Theo. The cohort has been waiting for you to let them. They have. Keep letting them.

To Mia, on the screen: Mia. I have not been your daily teacher this year. I have been, in some real way, your long-distance teacher – by the cohort's stories about you, by the letters you have written and that have, in pieces, made their way into our class through Sofia, by the times you have appeared on phones in this room. Mia, you have done the work of seventh grade in Pittsburgh, mostly without the cohort in your hallway. That is, in some real way, the hardest version of seventh grade. The cohort has been carrying you. You have been carrying the cohort. Both. The distance is a fact. The cohort is a fact. You are – Mia – you are the cohort. You always have been.

Mia, on the screen, was openly crying now.

Sofia was openly crying.

Most of the cohort was — in varying degrees of dignity — emotional.

Mr. Patel continued with the rest of the room. Twenty-three more cards. Each one specific. Each one delivered with full eye contact, because the delivery was part of the work. Maddie, two seats from Amara, got one. The kid who had been the cohort's adjacent-cohort kid all year got one. Every kid in the room got one. Nobody was overlooked. It took forty minutes.

At the end, Mr. Patel was empty.

He sat down on the edge of his desk.

He said, after a moment:

Friends. That is the last thing I have for you this year. The cards are yours to keep. Read them when you need them. Read them when you do not. They will, in some real way, mean something different when you re-read them in six months. They will mean something different again when you re-read them in six years.

He paused.

The architecture is yours.

He paused.

The architecture has been yours all year. I was, in some real way, just the witness. The building was your work. The building will continue to be your work.

He paused one more time.

Class. Thank you for letting me be your teacher this year.

The bell rang.

The class did not move for a minute.

Then, one by one, they got up.

Some of them came up to Mr. Patel. Sofia hugged him. Amara hugged him. Marcus shook his hand. Theo, who does not, by long-standing habit, hug teachers, walked up and

looked at Mr. Patel for one full second and nodded once. Mr. Patel nodded back.

Mia, on the screen, did a small wave.

The cohort filed out, into the hallway, past the Mistake Wall — which had two hundred and seventeen cards on it now — and into the rest of their lives.



After school, the cohort walked to Mason's.

The booth at Mason's is, by long-standing cohort tradition, the cohort's afterward place. The booth had been theirs since fifth grade. The booth had a small placard on the wall above it that said RESERVED FOR THE COHORT, which Mason — the diner's owner, who had known the cohort since they were small — had put up as a joke in fifth grade and which had, by middle school, become functionally true. The booth was for the cohort.

The cohort sat in the booth. Mia on speakerphone from her Pittsburgh kitchen, propped up against Sofia's water glass so the cohort could hear her and she could hear them.

Marcus ordered milkshakes for the table — eight, not counting Mia, because Mia could not have a milkshake through a phone but Marcus put a ninth on the order as a joke. The waitress, who had been the cohort's waitress for two years, played along. *Nine milkshakes*, she said. *One for the phone*.

Sofia said, *Mi, you have a milkshake in spirit*.

Mia said, *Sof. I appreciate the spiritual milkshake*.

The cohort laughed.

They sat in the booth for two hours.

They did not, in those two hours, do a single piece of curriculum work. They did not run a Compassionate Witness

exercise. They did not read each other's October letters. They did not write Letters of Release.

They just — sat. They told stories from the year. Marcus told the screenshot story for the millionth time, with the cohort interrupting at the parts they had memorized. Maya showed everybody the sketchbook. Jordan did a small reading of the British accent routine, and the cohort booed and laughed. Theo told a story about Mr. Ortiz that nobody had heard before. Kezia, very quietly, told the cohort about her grandmother saying her name on Mother's Day, which had been the previous Sunday — her grandmother had, for the first time in three months, said *Kezia* out loud, without prompting. The cohort, hearing this, had a silent moment, and then Sofia had reached across the booth and squeezed Kezia's hand. Mia, on speakerphone, said *Kez. That is huge.*

Kezia said, *I know.*

Pepper, under the booth — Marcus had brought Pepper, because the diner allowed dogs on the patio extension that the booth opened onto — was eating fries that Darius was sneaking him.

The cohort sat.

The booth held them.

The architecture had, by this point, mostly built itself for the rest of their lives. They were going to have hard years coming. Eighth grade. Ninth grade — and what would arrive in ninth grade neither they nor the book could fully predict. High school. Adulthood. There would be more rooms. More walls. More wiring. More grace, in more configurations, extended to more difficult and unsafe and complicated people.

But the floor was built. The walls were built. The wiring was in.

The cohort was the cohort.

That was the architecture of seventh grade.
That was the work of the year.

Closing Words

Here is what nobody told you about the year you just had.

Twelve is the year the voices get louder. The Inner Critic, who has been there since you were small, finds new material. The phone, which you have been carrying for a year or two by now, finds new ways to make you feel behind. The friend group, which used to be a single steady thing, becomes — for the first time — multiple things, and the multiple things have, sometimes, different rules.

You walked into Room 36 in September with the cohort. You walked out in June with the same cohort, plus what the cohort built.

Most of what was built is invisible.

Some of it is on the walls of Room 36 — eleven anchor charts that will, when the school turns over to next year's seventh grade, be carefully rolled up and stored by Mr. Patel, who keeps them in a box in his classroom because he believes — and he is right — that the anchor charts are artifacts and should not be thrown away.

Some of it is in the hallway — over two hundred cards on the Mistake Wall, which Ms. Calloway will move to the eighth-grade hallway in August, carefully, by hand, in the afternoons while the school is mostly empty. The Wall will travel with the cohort. The Wall has been traveling with the cohort since first grade.

Some of it is in the booth at Mason's — a small placard, *RESERVED FOR THE COHORT*, which Mason has been keeping clean.

Some of it — most of it, in fact — is inside the kids.

The Inner Critic and the Compassionate Witness. The Friend Test. The script-rewriting. The Letter of Release. The Repair Shape. Forgiveness ≠ Trust. Charitable Interpretation. The Grace Challenge. The Grace Audit. Vocabulary. A vocabulary they did not have in September. A vocabulary they will have for the rest of their lives.

You — the reader — also have the vocabulary now.

You did not have to be in Room 36 to get it.

You were in Room 36 the way readers are always in rooms — through the page, sitting next to the cohort in some imaginary chair, listening to Mr. Patel teach lessons that, in some real way, were being taught to you as well as to them.

The vocabulary is yours. The architecture is yours.

What you do with it is — and this has always been the answer — what you do with it is the work of the rest of your life.



You will keep making mistakes. Many of them. Some of them will hurt people. Some of them will hurt you. The four steps will still apply. *Acknowledge. Repair. Commit. Move on.*

The Friend Test will still apply: *would you talk to your best friend the way you are talking to yourself?* Catch the *but*. Finish the sentence without it. Do it again tomorrow.

Impact ≠ Intent will still apply. When you have hurt somebody by accident, do the shape. *I see the impact. I am not defending the intention. I am sorry.* One time. Move on.

Forgiveness ≠ Trust will still apply. Evict the people who are renting space in your head. Do not, in the evicting, also pretend they earned trust they have not earned. Two separate ledgers.

Charitable Interpretation will still apply. When the data is ambiguous — and most data is ambiguous — pick the kinder reading. The math says so. The architecture says so.

The Compassionate Witness will still be there in your head. She will be quiet in the first months. She will, with practice, get louder. By the time you are twenty, she will be — if you have done the work — the more reliable of the two voices.

The Grace Challenge will still be available to you. Seven days. Three criteria. Small. Specific. Costs you something. You can do it any week of your life. Many adults do.

The Grace Audit will still be available. *Where, in this room, is grace noticeably absent? What small specific thing could I do about the gap?*

The Mask is optional. The Mirror is yours. The Author is the one who picks.

These tools were not invented for a classroom. The classroom was where the cohort was given them, in a holding environment, with a witness, and time to practice. The classroom is over. The tools are still yours.



The cohort goes on from here.

Eighth grade is next. Mr. Patel will, in the cohort's eighth-grade year, retire — quietly, at the end of June after their eighth-grade year, after one more cohort behind theirs and one more cohort ahead. The cohort, by the time they leave middle school, will have been Mr. Patel's last full cohort. He will know that. They will know it. The knowing will be, in the cohort's eighth-grade year, the small invisible weight on every Friday afternoon.

Ms. Calloway will move with the cohort. She is — by Lincoln Park's careful design, by a decision the district made when the

cohort was in fifth grade — the cohort's long-walk adult. She will be at the middle school for the cohort's eighth grade. She will move up to the high school for their freshman year. She will be in their lives, in some form, through twelfth.

The architecture is going to be built again, in new rooms, with new teachers, with new walls and new wirings. The cohort will not, in eighth grade or in ninth or in twelfth, be done building. The architecture is not a thing you finish at twelve. The architecture is a thing you keep building, the rest of your life, on the foundation that — in the cohort's lucky case — was poured early and well.

You are also building the architecture.

You are the cohort the book has been talking to, on every page, in every chapter.

You may not have had a Ms. Calloway. You may not have had a Mr. Patel. You may not have a cohort. Many readers do not.

It is, in some real way, harder for you. We are not pretending it is not. But the tools are still the tools. The vocabulary is still the vocabulary. You can build the architecture without the room you were not given. You can find your own witnesses. You can find your own cohort. You can build, in your own life, the kind of room the cohort had — slower, smaller, less complete, but real.

The architecture is portable.

The architecture is yours.



We are not teaching you to feel better.

We are teaching you how to build a life that cannot be broken by shame — a structure with a foundation of self-worth, walls of self-compassion, wiring for empathy, and a facade that reflects what is actually true on the inside.

You have the foundation now. You have the walls. The wiring is in. The facade is your project for the rest of your life. We will not be there for most of it. Most of it you will do yourself, alone, in private, in moments nobody else sees.

That is how this kind of work always gets done.

Quietly. Daily. Without applause.

The architecture is yours.

The Mask is optional.

The Mirror is yours, also, and it has been all along.

You knew that, somewhere, before any of this. The book just gave you a vocabulary.

The vocabulary, now, is yours.

Carry it.

— J.A.R.



the year the room moves inside

A middle-school book that takes seriously what middle school actually is: the loudest year for the meanest voice in your own head.

The kids are twelve.

Most of them just turned twelve over the summer. By the time this book ends, most of them will be thirteen. The building is Lincoln Park Middle School. The classroom is Room 36, on the second floor. The teacher is Mr. Patel.

In first grade, the room was a literal room. By fourth grade, the room had become a vocabulary. In seventh grade — this book — the room is something else again. The room is interior. The work of the year is learning to be the cohort for yourself, in your own head, when none of the cohort is in the room with you.

A phone in your pocket runs a kind of comparison no human nervous system was designed to handle. The Inner Critic gets louder. A friend you have loved since first grade disappoints you in a way you have no blueprint for. And somewhere in the hallway near Room 36, the Mistake Wall — the one Ms. Calloway started when these kids were six — is still there, waiting.

Read this whether you knew these kids as first-graders or are meeting them now. Either way, they will let you in.



BOOK THREE OF FIVE