
A JOURNEY TO BECOME
Stories of Children and the People Who Love and Care for Them
A CARING PARENT

NARAYANA JOY PUBLISHING

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A Caring Parent



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This publication is offered as part of an ongoing body of work exploring the relationships between children and the people who love and care for them, and the evolving experience of family and community life.

The stories presented throughout this volume arise from a field of reflection, observation and lived experience. Their purpose is not to promote belief, establish doctrine, or replace existing traditions, disciplines or professional guidance. Rather, they are offered as contributions to a wider conversation about how children grow, and what helps them become who they are.

Readers are encouraged to approach these pages through their own discernment, experience and reflection. Nothing contained within this work requires agreement, affiliation or adherence. The stories are intended to be read freely, considered thoughtfully, and received according to each reader's own understanding.

This book is offered in the spirit of open inquiry and responsible Stewardship, with the hope that it may contribute to deeper reflection, meaningful conversation, and a greater appreciation for every child now finding their way into the world.

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The parables in this book are works of imagination; any resemblance to real people is unintended. The true stories are told from published accounts, listed at the back of the book.

A complimentary digital copy is available; see the website address above. All enquiries to egaadministration@protonmail.com.

Narayana Joy Publishing

For every child, still becoming,
and for every hand that holds them on the way.

A Word from the Author

You won't find my name on the cover of this book. If it were there, it would only stand between you and the truth of these pages, casting a shadow where there should only be light.

The honest truth is that I have stumbled through this life more times than I care to admit. I have made mistakes that ache in the quiet hours of the night—failures that belong entirely to me. Untangling them has become the quiet work of my life, an ongoing attempt to uncover enough grace and forgiveness within my own heart so that, when the right moment comes, there might be a bridge built back toward my children.

Thirty years is a painfully long time to live in the quiet space of separation. In those thirty years apart, I have had to sit with my regrets, learning the hard way from the grief and wisdom of others who also watched their hopes for harmony slip away. Yet through every passing year, one constant remained untouched: I am their father. Time, distance, and silence cannot undo that. What has shifted, slowly and humbling, is how I see. My deepest prayer is that when the day comes that I stand before my boys again, we won't see the past between us. I hope we look upon each other with new eyes and softened hearts—ready simply to listen, and ready to be heard on both sides.

So please, let this book be about the people who live inside it, and those who may find their way here, not the person holding the pen. It belongs to the grandmother gently turning a baby outward so the whole family can finally see; the boy whose gifted hands could tie any knot in the world, even while the words on the page eluded him; and the little girl trembling, but brave enough, as she handed over a folded letter.

Most of all, my hope is that by the time you turn the last page, the person you see with gentler, more forgiving eyes is a child waiting in your own life.

If you must call me anything at all, just call me a father who cares. It is the only title I have ever truly wanted, and the only qualification that matters here.

A NOTE ON WELLBEING AND CARE

This book is offered for reflection and encouragement. It is not medical, psychological, legal or educational advice, and nothing within it should be used to delay or replace help from a qualified practitioner. Where a circumstance involves a child's safety, health, development or wellbeing, these stories are meant to accompany that help, not to stand in its place.

It does not replace schools, teachers, safeguarding duties, child protection services or the legal responsibilities of parents and guardians. No child is to be labelled, sorted or treated differently on the strength of anything in these pages, and no difference in a child's development is to be read as a sign of failure in the child or in those who care for them.

No difficulty in a child's or a family's life is a sign that anyone has failed, or not tried hard enough, or is worth less, and no reader is asked to interpret their circumstances in any particular way.

If a child is in danger, call 999. If you are worried about a child, the NSPCC is there on 0808 800 5000. If you are finding things hard yourself, Samaritans are there day and night on 116 123.

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Before We Begin

Imagine a kitchen on an ordinary morning, a day or two after a baby has come home. The whole family has found a reason to be there: a grandmother still in her coat, an uncle who drove half the night, two cousins in their pajamas', the dog under the table hoping for toast. The baby's mother is tired and happy, and she has handed her son to his grandmother for a minute so that she can drink a cup of tea while it is still hot.

The grandmother does something nobody expects. She does not hold him close, or rock him, or say who he looks like. She turns him gently in her arms so that he is facing the room, facing all of them, and holds him there for a moment, a small bundle looking out at the faces looking at him. Nobody makes a speech. Nobody says what he will be when he grows up. She simply lets him see them, and lets them see him, and says three things.

"Here you are. We have been waiting for you. Show us who you are."

The last of those three sentences sits at the heart of this book, because I have come to believe it is the truest thing a grown-up can say to a child. Not "This is who you will be." Not "Make us proud." Not even "We know what is best for you." Simply: *Show us.* We are here, we are paying attention, and we are ready to be surprised.

Everything that follows that sentence is a journey to become: the child's, as they grow into the person they already are, and ours, as we learn to become the kind of grown-ups who can wait, and watch, and make room. That is where this book takes its name.

It sounds easy. It is the hardest thing in the world.

Why this book

Most of us were brought up, and most of us bring children up, inside an old idea that we rarely notice. The idea is that a child arrives more or less empty, and that our job is to fill them: with facts, with manners, with skills, with the right opinions, with whatever we wish someone had given us. When a child struggles, we look for what is missing and try to supply it. When a child shines, we take a little of the credit.

There is truth in it. Children need an enormous amount from us: food and warmth, language and safety, patience, boundaries, years of steady care. Nobody raises themselves.

But there is another way of seeing, very old and very simple, that changes everything once you notice it. It says that every child arrives already whole. Not finished, not grown, not able to do without us, but whole: a person in their own right, carrying their own gifts and their own purpose, the way a bowl of dough already holds the loaf. Our work is not to make it rise. Our work is to give it warmth and room and time, to knead and shape and show how when that is what is needed, to keep the draughts off, to resist the urge to poke at it, and one day, when the time comes, to hand it over.

Everything in this book grows from that one idea.

What you will find here

You will find stories: one hundred and eight of them, gathered into twelve chapters that follow a child from before they are born to the day they walk out into their own life at twenty-one.

Most of the stories are parables. They are imagined, though nothing in them is unlikely, and I suspect you will recognise people you know in them. A few are true, and each is marked as such beneath its title, because sometimes the real world has already told

the story better than anyone could invent it: a hospital in Bogotá that found the warmest place for a premature baby was its mother's chest; a Danish mother who began taking her own and her neighbours' children into the woods, and started something that spread far beyond her without meaning to; a poet who took a ten-year-old's autograph book home overnight and wrote something in it that the boy carried all his life.

The people in these stories are ordinary. A nineteen-year-old who moves a scan photograph from behind the takeaway menus to the middle of the fridge. A grandad of sixty-three, bringing up a baby on his own, learning to tell one cry from another. A boy of ten who reads the bus numbers aloud for his nan, because she has started getting things wrong. A father who keeps saying one word on the reservoir road, "Heron", long after his son has stopped answering. A girl just arrived from Portugal, with no English yet, who draws her grandmother's yard in chalk by the playground fence.

None of them is a hero, and none of them gets everything right. That is rather the point.

Three promises

If this book has a heart, it is three promises.

No new cage. Even the most beautiful idea about children becomes a cage the moment a child is forced to fit it. That includes every idea in this book.

Each child served as the one they are. Not as the child we expected, or the child next door, or the child we once were.

Every child heard. Not only when they speak in words, and not only when what they say is what we hoped to hear.

You will find these promises kept and broken all through the stories that follow. They are not rules. They are more like a direction to face in.

How to read it

You do not have to start at the beginning. Many people will open this book in the middle, read one story, close it and think about it on the way to work. That is exactly how it was meant to be used.

After each story there are a few words in italics headed *Sit with this*. They are not a test, and they do not have right answers. They are simply a question to carry for a day.

At the end of each chapter you will find a handful of small, practical things you might try, at home, in a classroom, in a care setting, at the side of a football pitch. Most of them cost nothing, and most take only a few minutes. None of them replaces proper help when a child or a family needs it, and where that help matters the stories say so.

And at the very end of each chapter there are a few lines to help you remember your own.

The stories you already carry

This book is not finished, and I hope it never will be.

Most of the stories in it are imagined, but they are drawn from the kind of lives many of us know: from being a child, from bringing children up, from the long tradition of people who have thought hard and lovingly about them. The best stories about children are not in any book yet. They are in your memory. The afternoon your father finally came to watch. The teacher who noticed. The night you sat outside a slammed door and waited. The day your own child taught you something you thought you already knew.



A last word before you begin

Wherever you are, whoever you are, if a child has ever been placed in your arms, or in your care, or in your classroom, or simply in your path, this book is for you.

And if you are reading it for the child you once were, it is for you too.

Here you are. I have been waiting for you.

Turn the page.

PROLOGUE

The Big Brown Bowl

On Saturday mornings Jessie's grandmother made bread, and Jessie was allowed to help if she washed her hands and stood on the red stool.

Gwen kept her flour in a tin that had once held biscuits, and her yeast in a little jar in the door of the fridge. She measured nothing that Jessie could see. A handful, a pinch, a slosh of water from the kettle cooled with cold from the tap, tested on the inside of her wrist the way you test a baby's bottle.

"Why that bowl?" Jessie asked, the first time. It was the biggest bowl in the house, brown outside and cream inside, with a chip on the rim the shape of a fingernail. The dough sat in the bottom of it like a pebble in a bath.

"Because it won't always be that size," said Gwen.

Jessie kneaded, which mostly meant pressing her fists into the dough and watching them come out sticky. Gwen did the rest, folding and turning with the heel of her hand, slow and steady, talking about the neighbour's cat. Then she rubbed a little oil round the bowl, dropped the dough in, and laid a damp tea towel over the top. The tea towel had a map of Anglesey on it.

They carried the bowl together up to the airing cupboard on the landing and set it on the shelf above the boiler, between the pillowcases.

"Now what?"

"Now we wait."

Jessie was five, and waiting was not something she was good at. She asked if it was done. She asked if she could poke it. Gwen said that if you poked it, it would sigh and sink, and then it would have to start all over again, and it would not thank you.

"Can I look, though?"

Gwen thought about this. Then she lifted one corner of the tea towel, just a crack, so that Jessie could put her eye to it.

"Looking," said Gwen. "Not touching."

The dough had begun to round itself. It was paler than before, and it had a smell, warm and a little sour, which Gwen said was the smell of something getting on with its work.

They looked every half an hour, because Jessie insisted. Each time Gwen lifted the corner, and Jessie looked, and Gwen laid the corner down again. Nobody did anything else to it. It did not seem to need them to.

By eleven o'clock the dough had climbed the sides of the big brown bowl and was pushing at the tea towel from underneath, smooth and domed, like someone asleep under a sheet.

Jessie stared at it for a long time.

"We didn't do that," she said.

"No," said Gwen.

"It just did it."

"It knew how. It only wanted somewhere warm, and a bit of room."

Later the house filled with the smell of baking, and they ate the heel of the loaf hot, with too much butter, at the kitchen table.

The Saturday after, Gwen set the bowl in the airing cupboard and went down to put the kettle on. When she came back up, Jessie was on the landing chair with one corner of the tea towel lifted, a crack and no more. She looked for a long moment. Then she laid it down again, as carefully as a blanket.

"Take your time," she told it.



Here you are. We have been waiting for you.

PART ONE

Before You Arrive

Before birth and the first year

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

— *Kahlil Gibran,* The Prophet *(1923)*

Long before a child can speak, long before they are born, sometimes long before they are even thought of, the world they will step into is already being made: by the people who will hold them, by what those people carry from their own childhoods, and by how much room they have made inside themselves for someone they have not yet met. These first three chapters are about that preparation, and about the thread that begins between a child and those who love them before anyone has said a single word.

CHAPTER 1

Here You Are

Before a child can say a single word, they are already someone.

Saturday morning, the supermarket, the queue at checkout four. A man with a basket of beer and crisps. A woman checking her list. A teenager buying a meal deal and looking at his phone. Nobody is speaking to anybody, which is how we like it.

Near the front is a young couple. He is pushing the trolley. She is pushing a pram, and in the pram, with a blanket tucked over her knees, is a baby. She cannot be more than a few weeks old, and she has that look new babies have, as if she has just come from somewhere very far away.

Then something happens to the queue. The man with the beer stops looking at the floor. The woman puts her list down. The teenager lowers his phone. The checkout assistant, who has been scanning at a great pace, pauses with a tin of tomatoes in her hand. For perhaps five seconds, a whole row of strangers simply stands there and looks at this small person, and every face softens in the same way.

Nobody says anything clever. The checkout assistant says, "Oh, look at you," and the baby looks back at her with great seriousness, and then the tin goes through the scanner and the morning carries on.

It is over in seconds, and I think it matters more than it seems. Not one person in that queue knows anything about that child. Whether she was planned or a surprise, whether her parents are rich or struggling, whether she will be clever or musical or good at football: none of that has happened yet. And still, without being asked, they stand for her. Something in us knows, before we have

thought about it at all, that the most important person in the room has just arrived.

This chapter is about that knowing, and about how easily we lose it once the busyness begins.

There is so much to do before a child comes: rooms to clear, forms to fill in, money to worry about, names to argue over. And alongside all that, another kind of preparing often goes on, quieter and harder to see. We start to decide who the child will be. The trade they will carry on. The team they will support. The chances we never had that they will have instead. These hopes nearly always come from love, and they do not need to be thrown away. They only need to step back from the doorway a little, so that the child who actually arrives can be met.

Every child arrives as someone. Not as an empty jug to be filled, and not as a future worker to be trained, but as a whole person who has come with something of their own. You may call that a soul, or use another word, or no word at all. Either way, the child's worth is already there when they come. Nothing they do will ever add to it, and nothing that happens to them can take it away. Our part is to recognise it, and to keep on recognising it on the days when it is hard to see.

Children come by many roads. Some are longed for for years, and some arrive before anyone is ready. Some come through adoption, fostering or a grandparent saying yes; some after a loss, or with news that frightens us. None of these roads makes a child any less welcome. No child, wanted or not wanted, is ever a mistake. And if you are reading this in shock or in grief, please know that nobody needs a reason handed to them while they are still reeling. Care comes first. Meaning can wait until the heart is ready for it.

The nine households in this chapter are each getting ready in their own way, and not one of them gets it all right. But each of them, at some point, does what that supermarket queue did without thinking. They stop, and they stand for a child.

1

The Wave

The sonographer had been chatting about the weather. Then she stopped.

Kirsten noticed the quiet before she noticed anything else. The woman moved the probe across her tummy, slowly, and back again, and pressed a little harder, and looked at the screen with her lips pressed together. Jon was holding Kirsten's hand. He had been grinning at the grey shapes on the monitor for ten minutes, saying "Is that his foot? Is that his nose?", and now he went quiet too.

"I'm just going to ask a colleague to have a look," the sonographer said. "I won't be a minute."

It was more than a minute. When she came back with a second woman, they looked together, and measured, and then the second woman pulled a chair round and sat down where they could see her face.

The baby's left arm, she said, had not formed all the way. It stopped a little below the elbow. There was no hand on that side. Everything else they had looked at, his heart, his spine, his kidneys, the other arm with its five fingers, was as it should be. She said they would be referred to a specialist team to look again and talk it all through.

"Did I do something?" said Kirsten.

"No," said the woman, very clearly. "Nothing you did, and nothing you could have done."

The specialist, a week later, said the same thing in more words. It happened sometimes, early on, while the baby was still forming, and most of the time nobody ever knew why. On its own, as it seemed to be, it usually meant exactly what it looked like and nothing more. He gave them the number of a charity for families of children with limb differences, and said that most children born like their son grew up doing almost everything other children did, often in their own way.

They thanked him. They drove home. They did not ring anyone.

Jon had been a goalkeeper for a pub team for fifteen years. In the cupboard under the stairs, in a carrier bag, there was a pair of tiny goalkeeper's gloves his brother had sent as a joke the day they found out it was a boy. That night Jon took the bag out of the cupboard and sat on the bottom stair with it on his knee. He did not open it. He just held it, until his feet went cold on the hall tiles, and then he put it back in the cupboard and shut the door.

Kirsten lay awake doing a different thing. She was picturing the boy she had been picturing for five months, the one with two hands round a beaker and two hands up the slide, and making herself look at him properly, and letting him go. It felt like a death, and then she felt ashamed that it did, because the baby was alive and kicking her under the ribs, and nothing about him had changed except what she knew.

They grieved. They did not tell each other, at first, that this was what they were doing. Later they both said that it was the right thing, and that they were glad they had done it before he came, and not after.

In the weeks that followed, Kirsten rang the charity and spoke to a mother whose daughter was nine. Jon read everything, then stopped reading and went to work. They told their families, who said *oh, love*, and then, mostly, the right things. They had chosen a name months ago. For a while neither of them said it out loud. Then one evening Kirsten was eating toast on the sofa with her feet on Jon's lap and the baby gave a great shove, and she said, without thinking, "Ruairi, that's my bladder," and Jon laughed, and after that it was easy again.

He was born on a wet Sunday in November, after a long labour and a short push, pink and furious, and the midwife lifted him straight onto Kirsten's chest.

Jon bent over them both. He had promised himself he would look at the right hand first and then the left, so that he would not stare. He forgot. He forgot about hands altogether. He was looking at the face, which was squashed and red and had his own mother's

chin on it, and before he knew what he was doing he had put out his finger and touched the baby's cheek.

The right hand came up and took it. Tightly, all five fingers, the way a man takes the rail on a bus that has braked too hard.

And the left arm came up as well. It came up out of the blanket, short and round and creased at the elbow, and waved, once, twice, in the warm air of the delivery room, the way someone waves across a crowded platform at the person they have come to meet.

"Hello," said Jon. His voice went. "Hello. There you are."

The arm waved again. Kirsten laughed and cried at the same time, and the midwife laughed too, and Ruairi held on to his father's finger and would not let go of it for anybody.

Sit with this: Have you ever carried a picture of a child that the real one turned out not to match? What became of the picture?

2

Mill Street

Julian and Bernard were halfway through their assessment to adopt when they realised that they did not know a single person on their own street.

They had moved to Mill Street the summer before, a terrace of twenty-two houses in an old Lancashire cotton town, because the house had a back yard and a spare room and was forty minutes from their friends in Manchester. The only contact they had had with their neighbours was through a WhatsApp group called *Mill Street Bins*. It was used almost entirely for complaints. On their first day, a Mr Pritchard at number fourteen had posted a photograph of their removal van with the message *Some of us need to get our cars out.*

Then their social worker, Mrs Halliday, sat at their kitchen table with her lanyard and her laptop, working through the report that would go to the adoption panel, and asked about their support network.

"Who's close by?" she said. "If one of you is ill. If the baby's poorly at two in the morning and you need someone to sit with them while you run to the late chemist. Who's ten minutes away?"

Bernard looked at Julian. Julian looked at the window.

"We're working on that," said Bernard.

That Saturday, Julian bought three tins of biscuits from the supermarket and they went door to door. It was the most frightening thing either of them had done since their first meeting with the adoption agency. At number nine there was a nurse who worked nights and had been asleep. At number seventeen, a young couple with twin toddlers, who said yes before Julian had finished explaining. At number twenty, nobody. At number fourteen, Mr Pritchard.

He opened the door in his slippers and looked at the biscuits with deep suspicion.

"We're adopting," said Bernard. "A baby, probably. We've been asked who'd help if we ever got stuck. We wondered if you'd mind if we put your name down. You wouldn't have to do anything. Probably."

Mr Pritchard looked at them for a long moment. "A baby," he said.

"Probably."

"I drove the 481 for twenty-eight years," said Mr Pritchard. "I've had more babies sick on me than you've had hot dinners." He took the biscuits. "Put me down."

After that, something on Mill Street began to change, slowly at first. The young couple from number seventeen posted in the bins group that they had a cot going spare. Bernard checked it against the safety standard and bought a new mattress for it anyway. The nurse at number nine offered a steriliser. Somebody's mother had a pram. Mr Pritchard, without being asked, came round one Sunday with a toolbox and rehung their back gate, which had dropped on its hinges, and then stayed for tea and told them about the 481. People who had lived on the street for fifteen years without knowing each

other's names now stopped on the pavement to ask whether there was any news.

Panel came in the autumn, and they were approved, and then there was no news at all. Matching takes as long as it takes. Somewhere in the county, a child the street had never seen was not yet ready to come anywhere. And yet that child was already doing something no council leaflet had ever managed. Mill Street was talking.

The call came in February. A boy, seven weeks old, in foster care two towns over. By the time he came home to Mill Street for good he was nine weeks old and weighed a little over five kilos and had an opinion about every bottle he was offered.

Julian carried him in through the front door in his car seat on a grey Tuesday afternoon. Bernard followed with a bag in each hand. Neither of them had slept properly for four nights. They sat down on the sofa with the car seat between them on the floor and just looked at him, and the baby looked at the ceiling, and nobody moved.

Then Bernard's phone buzzed. And again. And again.

He took it out. It was the bins group. There were fourteen new messages.

Welcome home little man.

Lasagne on your step, number nine.

If you need anything, we're in. Twins are not asleep anyway.

And at the bottom, from Mr Pritchard:

Have told the bin men Tuesday to keep it down. Have had a word.

Julian laughed so suddenly that the baby startled and turned his head. Bernard scrolled back up to the top of the screen and stopped.

Someone, sometime that afternoon, had changed the name of the group. It just said *Mill Street* now. The word *Bins* had gone.

Sit with this: What might a child on the way give to the people around them, before anyone has even met?

3

Behind the Menus

Donna was forty-five and thought it was the change.

Her periods had been all over the place for a year, and she cried at an advert for gravy. So when she was sick two mornings running, she put it down to a bad prawn, and when she was sick on the third, she bought a test in the big Boots in town, where nobody knew her, and did it in the toilets of the shopping centre to rule it out.

It did not rule it out.

She sat in the cubicle for twenty minutes while someone ran the hand dryer over and over on the other side of the door. She had two grown-up children. Leanne was twenty-two and lived in Leeds with her boyfriend. Callan was nineteen and lived at home and worked shifts at the distribution warehouse off the bypass. Donna had given the cot away eighteen years ago. She had reading glasses on a cord.

Mick, when she told him that night, sat down very slowly on the edge of the bath and then started to smile, and stopped himself, because of her face.

"What will people say," said Donna. It was not a question.

She knew exactly what they would say, because she had said it herself, years ago, about a woman at the school gates. *At her age.* She had laughed when she said it. Now she heard it in every voice she knew: her sister, the girls at work, Leanne. She heard it most of all in Callan's, though she could not have said why.

So she told nobody else. She went to the hospital on her own for the scan, and the midwife there was kind and practical and did not raise an eyebrow, and talked her through the extra tests she would be offered and why. Donna nodded. She came home with the little black-and-white photograph in her handbag and stood in the kitchen with it. She could not throw it away and she could not look at it. In the end she slid it onto the fridge door, behind the takeaway menus, under the magnet shaped like a pineapple, where only she would know it was.

It stayed there for three weeks.

The house had gone very quiet. Donna noticed it herself. She shushed Mick when he asked how she was feeling, if the back door was open. She turned the radio down when the phone-in got onto babies. She put her hand on her tummy only when she was alone, and took it away when she heard a key in the lock. Some nights she lay awake and thought that whoever was in there had so far heard nothing about themselves but silence and worry, and a woman saying sorry under her breath.

It was a Thursday, just after eleven at night. Donna was in her dressing gown, filling a hot-water bottle. Callan came in from the late shift in his hi-vis, starving as always, and went straight to the fridge for the pizza menu.

He lifted it. The photograph slid down the fridge door and stopped against the pineapple. Donna stood with the kettle in her hand.

Callan looked at the photograph. He turned it towards the light, as if there might be a name on it. Then he turned round.

"Mam," he said. "Is this ours?"

She could not answer. She nodded. And then it all came out at once, the way it does, in a rush. That she was sorry. That she knew. That she was too old and it was embarrassing and he must be mortified, and she would understand if he did not want his mates to know, and she had not meant to—

"Mam." Callan put the pizza menu down. "What are you sorry for?"

She looked at him.

He was six foot one, with a moustache he was trying out. He crouched down in front of her in the middle of the kitchen lino, in his hi-vis, so that his face was level with the dressing gown.

"Now then," he said, to her middle, in a voice she had last heard him use with the neighbour's puppy. "I'm Callan. I'm your brother. You'll have heard her going on. Don't listen to her. We're all made up you're coming."

Then he stood up and went back to the fridge. He took the photograph out from behind the menus, and moved the menus to

the side, and put the scan right in the middle of the door at eye height, with the pineapple holding the top and a magnet from Whitby holding the bottom.

"There," he said. And then, "Can we still get a pizza?"

They got a pizza. Mick came down in his socks, woken by the voices, and found the two of them at the kitchen table at midnight, and saw the fridge door, and had to go and stand in the back garden for a minute.

The next morning, when Donna came down, there was a yellow sticky note on the fridge beneath the photograph, in Callan's terrible capitals.

WELCOME. THIS HOUSE IS LOUD. GET USED TO IT.

She left it there. She left it there for years.

Sit with this: What has a child on the way heard said about them so far, in your house? Who said it?

4

A Show of Herself

Caroline was seven months pregnant when she heard her grandmother's voice come out of her own mouth.

It was in the café at the garden centre, on a Sunday, at her sister's birthday lunch. Her sister's little boy, who was four, had been told he could not have a second cake, and he had lain down on the tiled floor between the tables and screamed. Her sister was in the toilets. Caroline, nearest, bent down, took him by the arm, and said in a low hard voice she had not known she owned:

"Get up. Don't you dare make a show of me."

He got up. He stopped screaming. And across the table, Caroline's mum put down her teacup and went pale.

Nobody else noticed. Lunch went on. But on the way home, Caroline sat in the passenger seat with her hand on her bump and felt sick, and it was not the baby.

Don't make a show of me. She had heard it every week of her childhood. When she cried at the dentist. When she sang too loudly in the supermarket. When she fell off her bike outside the newsagent's and sat on the pavement bleeding and howling, and her mum had hauled her up by the arm and hissed it at her while the people in the queue looked away. She had grown up quiet and careful, a girl who checked every room for who might be watching. And now it was in her own voice, ready, waiting for her child.

She did not mention it. Neither did her mum.

Two weeks later, Caroline's car failed its MOT, and her mum drove her to the thirty-two-week appointment at the hospital. They parked on the third floor of the multi-storey with twenty minutes to spare. Caroline reached for the door handle. Her mum did not move.

"That thing you said," her mum said. "To the little one. In the café."

Caroline let go of the handle.

"My mother said it to me." Her mum was looking straight ahead through the windscreen, at a concrete pillar with a number painted on it. "She said it about everything. If I laughed in church. If I had a nosebleed. And I said it to you, didn't I. Every week. I thought it was just what you said. I thought it was what mothers were for. Keeping you from being looked at."

Caroline did not say anything. She was afraid that if she did, her mum would stop.

"You were such a loud little girl," her mum said. "You were wonderful. And I made you small so nobody would look at me." She took a breath. "I'm sorry, love. I'm so sorry. I should have said it years ago."

They sat in the car. Somewhere below them a barrier went up and down.

"When that baby makes a show of you," her mum said at last, "and she will, hand her to me."

They were six minutes late for the appointment. Nobody minded.

The baby was born in early summer, a girl with a voice on her like a car alarm. When she was six weeks old, Caroline and her mum took

her to the garden centre café for the first time. It was a Saturday and it was packed. They had just sat down with a pot of tea when the baby woke, decided she was hungry, decided she was furious about it, and began to scream.

Caroline felt it at once, the old heat climbing up her neck. Heads were turning. A man at the next table had stopped with a scone halfway to his mouth. Her hands went cold. Her mouth opened, and she did not know what was going to come out of it.

Her mum stood up.

She lifted the baby out of the pram, tucked her against her shoulder, and set off round the café at a steady march, singing "One Man Went to Mow" at the top of her voice. She went past the cake counter. She went past the till. She went past the man with the scone and nodded to him as if they were old friends. She went round the table of ladies from the walking group and did two verses for their benefit, getting the number of men wrong, and going back to correct it.

The baby, astonished, stopped screaming to listen.

Caroline sat at the table with the pot of tea going cold in front of her. She watched her mother go all the way round the café and start a second lap, singing, swaying, making the biggest show of herself that anyone in that garden centre had ever seen. And not once did she look round to see who was looking.

Sit with this: Which words from your own childhood come out of your mouth before you have chosen them? Which would you keep?

5

Her Face Is Hers

By the time she was thirty-six weeks pregnant, Courtney had eleven thousand people following her bump.

It had started as a joke between her and her sister Fern. A photograph each Friday, side on, against the same bit of bedroom

wall, with a piece of fruit to show the size. A lime. An avocado. A cantaloupe, which neither of them had ever eaten. Then the scans went up, and the gender reveal in her mum's back garden, and the cravings, and the hospital bag, and the account grew. Strangers sent her presents. A pram company sent her a pram, on the understanding that it would be in the photographs. Women she would never meet told her she was glowing, and asked about the baby's name, and guessed the date, and some of them told her she was carrying low so it must be a boy, and were wrong, and did not seem to mind.

Courtney liked it. She was not ashamed of liking it. She had been lonely in the first months, with her friends all out on Saturday nights and her boyfriend on lates, and the account was company. Every scan was cheered. Every wobble was met with a hundred kind words.

Fern followed along, and liked everything. By the time Edie came she was pregnant herself, seven months behind, though only Courtney knew. Later she put her own bump up on her own small account, the same wall, the same fruit, a few hundred followers. Mostly family.

Edie was born on a Tuesday at ten to six in the morning. By seven, Courtney had her phone in her hand.

She had planned the first picture for weeks. The light from the window. The muslin with the stars on it. The baby asleep on her chest, face turned towards the camera. Her followers knew it was coming; she had told them she was in labour, and the comments were already rolling in. *Face reveal!!! Can't WAIT to see her. Bet she looks like you.*

She held the phone up above the two of them. Edie was asleep, her face pressed into the muslin, one cheek squashed up against her eye. Courtney looked at the screen. Then she lowered the phone and looked at the baby without it.

It was a very particular face. Not like a doll's or a photograph's. It frowned in its sleep. It had a tiny white spot on the end of its nose and a crease along the cheek from the blanket, and it moved all the time, as if the baby was dreaming about something serious. It was a

face, Courtney thought, that did not know yet that anybody was looking at it.

She thought about the woman in the hospital car park, three weeks ago, who had come up to her and said, "It's you, isn't it? From the account. Is she still Edie?" Courtney had been flattered at the time. Now she found she was holding the baby a little more tightly.

She thought about Edie at fourteen, typing her own name into a search bar.

She put the phone face down on the blanket.

It took her the rest of the day to write the post. In the end it was a photograph of the hospital window, with a cup of tea on the sill and the corner of the starry muslin, and three lines underneath.

She's here. She's well, and so am I. Her face is hers, so it stays off here until she's old enough to decide for herself. Thank you for keeping me company while I carried her.

Most people were lovely about it. Some were not. A few hundred people left. One woman wrote that it was a bit much, after everything they had been shown. The pram company sent a polite email. Courtney's mum rang and said, "But everyone wants to see her, love," and Courtney said, "I know, Mum. That's why."

Fern said nothing at all, and Courtney did not ask.

The account went quiet after that. Now and then Courtney put something up: a pram wheel in the leaves, a tiny sock on a radiator, a sunhat seen from behind on a beach in Filey. People still liked them. Fewer people. She found she minded less than she had expected.

Fern's son was born the following spring. Courtney found out the way everyone else did, from a photograph on Fern's account, late on a Saturday night. She opened it with Edie asleep on her shoulder.

It was a picture of two pairs of feet on a tartan picnic blanket. One pair was very new and very red. The other was seven months old, with a plaster on one big toe, and Courtney knew it straight away because she had put the plaster on herself. Underneath, Fern had written only: *Cousins. Faces are theirs.*

Courtney looked at it until the screen went dark. Then she put the phone down on the arm of the sofa, screen down, and turned her

head to look at the face on her shoulder, which only a handful of people in the world had ever seen. It was asleep. It had a smear of banana on its chin and its mouth was a little open, and it was entirely, privately, its own.

Sit with this: What do you share about the children you love, and who decides?

6

Five Hooks by the Back Door

Finlay had lived on the farm with Penny and Christopher for three years and four months when they told him about the baby.

He was nearly twelve. He had come to them at eight, after two other foster homes, with a rucksack and a carrier bag and a habit of eating very fast in case the plate was taken away. The farm was a hill farm in mid-Wales, three miles up a single-track road, all sheep and wind and wet dogs. It had taken him a year to stop eating fast. It had taken him two to call the sheepdog by her name instead of "the dog". Somewhere in the third year he had stopped asking, every time a car came up the track, whether it was the social worker.

Penny and Christopher had been told by more than one doctor that they would not have children of their own. They had stopped thinking about it a long time ago. So the baby was a surprise to everyone. They told their social worker first, and she helped them think about how to tell him. Then they told Finlay over tea, on a Thursday in spring, carefully, the way you tell a child anything that might frighten them.

"That's good," said Finlay. He finished his tea and went out to feed the dogs.

Penny noticed the rucksack two days later.

It had always lived in the bottom of his wardrobe, flat and empty. Now it was by his bed, and it was full. A spare jumper. His phone charger. The photograph of his birth mum. The folded-up Liverpool shirt Christopher had given him for his eleventh birthday. Penny

stood in his doorway and looked at it, and did not touch it, and went downstairs and told Christopher.

Christopher put down the paper.

"The last place," he said. "Before us. Wasn't there a baby?"

There had been. Finlay's second foster family had had a baby of their own, and six months later had rung the social worker to say they were finding it too much. Finlay had been moved on a Friday afternoon. He had been seven.

Penny and Christopher did not talk to him about the rucksack. They had both learned that you cannot argue a frightened child out of being frightened. Instead, the next Saturday, Penny stood in the back porch with a cup of tea and called him over.

By the back door there was a row of hooks on a length of old oak. Christopher's grandfather had put it up. Under each hook was a pair of wellies, and on each hook a coat. Christopher's waxed jacket. Penny's red waterproof. Finlay's green one, on the hook Christopher had screwed in on the day he arrived, slightly lower than the others so that an eight-year-old could reach. And at the end, a fourth hook, for the dog lead and whatever visitors left behind.

"We're going to need another one," said Penny. "For the baby. I wondered if you'd put it up. And you choose where it goes."

Finlay looked along the row, coat by coat.

"Christopher's better at drilling," he said.

"Christopher drilled yours in squint," said Penny. "Look at it. Three years I've been looking at that."

Finlay looked. It was squint. Very slightly. He had never noticed.

He took the drill from the shed and the box of screws. He measured, and measured again, and in the end he did not put the new hook at the end of the row, beside the dog lead. He put it between his own hook and Penny's, so close that the two would almost touch.

"So I can reach it down," he said. "When it's little. If you're busy."

It went in crooked. More crooked than his own. Nobody suggested he do it again.

That night, when Penny went up to say goodnight, the rucksack had gone from beside the bed. She found it later, in the bottom of the wardrobe, flat and empty, where it had always been.

The baby was born in the first week of December, a boy, and came home up the single-track road through the first snow of the year. Finlay was waiting in the porch with his coat still on and the sheepdog going in circles round his legs. He had cleared the step of snow without being asked.

That night, by the back door, there were five hooks on the old length of oak. The newest one leaned sideways, a little drunk. On it hung a snowsuit no bigger than a tea towel, and right beside it, so close they were touching, hung a green coat that still smelled of sheep.

Sit with this: When a new child comes into a home, who else might be wondering where they stand?

7

Our Second

Stella and Jeremy lost their first baby at eighteen weeks, in a January when the sea at the bottom of their street was the colour of a slate roof.

The hospital was kind. A midwife with a soft Geordie voice sat with them until it was dark outside. Before they left, she gave them a small white cardboard box. Inside were two tiny footprints in ink, a hat no bigger than an egg cup knitted by a volunteer, a certificate with the date on it, and the last scan photograph. Stella could not look at it. Jeremy put it in the loft when they got home, behind the Christmas decorations, and neither of them went up there again.

People were kind too, in the way people are. *It's very common. You'll have another. At least it was early.* Jeremy's mother, who had grown up in the village and knew more about grief than she ever said, put a hand on Stella's arm and told her, "Least said, pet. Least said, soonest mended." And so very little was said. Jeremy went back out

on his brother's boat after a week. Stella went back to the chemist's after two. Their friends stopped asking after a month.

The next summer, Stella was pregnant again.

She told nobody until she was nearly five months gone. She would not buy anything. Not a vest, not a sock. When Jeremy said *when* about the baby, she corrected him to *if*. Some mornings she woke up and could not tell whether what she felt was hope or dread, and she lay very still, waiting for it to decide.

At the booking appointment at the health centre, the midwife was young and in a hurry. She had a form on her screen and a great many boxes to get through.

"And is this your first pregnancy?"

Stella opened her mouth. She thought of the questions that would follow if she said no. The dates. The weeks. The kind face. Being asked to say it all again, in a little room with a computer.

"Yes," she said.

The midwife ticked the box and moved on.

Stella was silent all the way home along the coast road. That evening she sat at the kitchen table and did not eat. When Jeremy asked what was wrong she put her face in her hands.

"I said she wasn't there," she said. "I sat in that room and said she was never there."

Jeremy stood up, went out to the landing, pulled down the loft ladder, and came back ten minutes later with cobwebs in his hair and the white box in his hands. He put it on the kitchen table between them.

They opened it together. The footprints. The hat. The scan photograph, which Stella looked at properly for the first time and found she could bear. They sat with it until gone midnight, not talking much. Then Jeremy carried the box through to the front room and put it on the shelf by the clock, where it could be seen.

At the next appointment there was a different midwife, older, with reading glasses on her head. She looked at the screen and frowned at it.

"First pregnancy, it says here?"

"No," said Stella. "It's our second."

The midwife took her glasses down from her head, changed the box on the form, and turned her chair round to face them properly. "Tell me about your first," she said.

On the way home Stella asked Jeremy to stop the car outside the shop on the front. She went in and came out with a white vest, the smallest one they had, in a paper bag. It was the first thing she had bought.

Their daughter was born the following March, on a morning of hard bright wind, with a full head of dark hair and the loudest cry the midwife said she had heard all week. When the health visitor came to the house ten days later, she sat on the sofa with her folder and asked, "And is she your first?"

"She's our second," said Jeremy, before Stella could answer.

The health visitor nodded and wrote it down, and did not ask anything more, and that was right too.

That evening Stella took the hospital wristband that had gone round her daughter's ankle and put it, with the first photograph and a lock of the dark hair, into a new box. It was white cardboard, the same as the other. Jeremy put it on the shelf by the clock.

One of the boxes would go on filling for years. The other was finished. They sat side by side in the front room, where everyone who came in could see them, and they were exactly the same size.

Sit with this: Is there someone your family stopped speaking of because it seemed kinder? Kinder to whom?

8

Likes and Not Likes

Molly was six when her brother came home, and on the first evening she announced that somebody ought to find out what he was like, since nobody else seemed to be doing it.

Her mum, Laura, was on the sofa with her feet up and the baby asleep on her chest. Her dad, Gareth, was at the kitchen table trying

to work out the steriliser from a leaflet that had been translated into English from another language and then, he said, back again. Both of them said it was a lovely idea.

So Molly fetched the big sheet of sugar paper left over from Christmas, and her felt tips, and taped the paper to the back of the kitchen door at her own height. Down the middle she ruled a line. At the top of one side she wrote LIKES. At the top of the other, after some thought, she wrote NOT LIKES.

"He's four days old, Moll," said Gareth. "He might not have opinions yet."

Molly gave him the look she kept for people who said there was no such thing as mermaids.

The first entry went up the next morning. *NOT LIKES: hats.* This was true. Every time Laura put the little knitted hat from the hospital on him, Alfie went red in the face and shoved his whole head against it until it came off. The midwife who called that afternoon said lots of babies were like that. Molly wrote it up anyway, underlined, because it was him doing it, not lots of babies.

After that the entries came thick and fast.

LIKES: the hoover (goes to sleep).

NOT LIKES: being put down.

LIKES: Dad singing (the football one).

NOT LIKES: Dad singing (all the other ones).

LIKES: the fan over the cooker.

The cooker fan was Gareth's discovery, at ten past three in the morning, in his dressing gown, with Alfie screaming and every other idea used up. He had switched the fan on to see what he was doing, and Alfie had stopped as if somebody had pulled out a plug. Molly wrote it up at breakfast with great seriousness and a box round it. For the next month the fan ran so much that the kitchen sounded like the inside of an aeroplane, and the neighbours asked if they were doing a lot of frying.

Gran came on the bus with a cake tin, put her glasses on and read the door from top to bottom.

"*Not likes: Gran's perfume*," she read out. "Well. Charming."

The next time she came she was not wearing any. Alfie fell asleep on her shoulder for an hour and forty minutes, and Molly moved Gran across to the other column with a long green arrow, which Gran said was the nicest thing that had happened to her all year.

The list ran off the bottom of the first sheet and onto a second. Some of it was disputed. Gareth held that Alfie liked being driven round the ring road at night. Laura said Alfie liked being driven anywhere, so long as she was not the one doing it at midnight. Molly wrote it under LIKES with a question mark and a small drawing of the car. Some entries were Molly's own judgement. *LIKES: me (he looks at me the most).* Nobody argued with that one. As far as anyone could tell, it was correct.

Then, at five weeks, on a wet Sunday afternoon, Molly was lying on the rug beside him doing her best impression of the hoover, which involved a lot of spit. Alfie turned his head and looked at her, and his whole face changed. His mouth went wide and wobbly and his eyes went with it.

"That's wind," said Gareth, from the doorway.

"It is not," said Laura, sitting up so fast she spilt her tea.

Molly did the hoover again. Alfie did it again. It went all the way up to his eyes. Laura laughed, and found she was crying a bit as well, the good kind, and Gareth got down on the rug in his socks and said, "Again, Moll, go on," and she did the hoover until she was hoarse.

Afterwards she went to the kitchen door with the purple pen and stood with the lid between her teeth, because there was a problem. Both sheets were full. There was no room left in either column, and this did not belong in a column anyway.

In the end she dragged a chair over, climbed up, and wrote it right across the top, above LIKES and NOT LIKES, in letters bigger than anything else on the door.

HE CAN SMILE. (AT ME.)

That evening Gareth came in to switch the cooker fan on and found the three of them in front of the door: Laura with Alfie on her shoulder, and Molly standing on the chair, reading the whole list out

to her brother from the top, pointing at each line with the purple pen, in case there was anything he wanted to change.

Sit with this: What has a very new baby near you already made perfectly clear? Who was the first to notice?

9

The Hedgehog Book

Isabel had two children of her own, a husband who worked on the railways, and a house at the end of a village in Somerset with a damp kitchen and a big garden. She was thirty-six. She had been pregnant twice already and had liked it both times, which her friends said was unnatural. And when a couple she had met through a surrogacy organisation, a woman who had lost her womb to cancer at thirty and the husband who had sat beside her through all of it, asked whether she would carry a baby for them, she said yes.

People asked her the same question, over and over, in different ways. *Won't it be hard to give him up?* She always gave the same answer. "He isn't mine to give up. I'm just looking after him till he's ready."

On paper it was not quite so simple. Until a court made the parental order, some weeks after the birth, the law would count her as his mother. But it was true in the way she meant it, and it did not mean she held anything back.

From the start she talked to him the way she had talked to her own children before they were born. She told him what the weather was like. She played him the radio in the kitchen. And every night, from the first week she could feel him move, she read him the same book.

It was a picture book her own children had loved, a battered thing with a cracked spine, about a hedgehog who could not find his hat. On every other page the hedgehog stamped his foot and said, "Oh, BOTHER." Her six-year-old daughter insisted on doing that line herself, very loudly, with her mouth pressed up against Isabel's tummy. Her eight-year-old son did the voice of the badger. Her

husband, on the nights he was home, did the owl, badly. By the seventh month, the baby kicked every time anyone said "Oh, BOTHER", and the whole family knew it.

The couple came down from Birmingham once a month, and Isabel told them everything. That he got hiccups after spicy food. That he liked the radio but not the news. That he went very still when it rained on the conservatory. And about the hedgehog.

He was born in a hospital in Taunton in October, at four in the morning, a long, cross, healthy boy with a lot of fair hair. His parents were in the room. His mother cut the cord, with her hands shaking. Isabel watched her take him and hold him against her for the first time, and felt something she would later find very hard to describe, which was not loss and was not quite anything else either.

In the afternoon, in the family room on the ward, the baby would not settle. His mother walked him and jiggled him and sang to him, and he cried, and her face began to crumple. "He doesn't know me," she whispered. "Why would he know me?"

Isabel had been waiting until the right moment, and this was it. She took the book out of her bag. It had a new piece of tape on the spine. Inside the front cover, in her careful handwriting, she had written the dates of every month, and underneath, the names of everyone who had read it to him and which voices they had done.

"He knows this," she said. "He's heard it every night since May." She handed it to his mother. "You do it now."

His mother opened it. She read the first page quietly and too slowly, losing her place twice. The baby went on crying. Isabel's daughter, who had come in with her dad to see the baby and was sitting on the end of the bed eating crisps, could not bear it.

"No," she said. "You have to say *Oh, BOTHER* really loud. Like this. Oh, BOTHER."

The baby stopped crying.

His mother looked at him. Then she looked at the book, and took a breath, and said it, really loud, in the middle of the maternity ward. "Oh, BOTHER."

He opened his eyes.

Isabel went home the next morning. She did not cry in the car, though she had expected to. She cried that evening, in the kitchen, once the children were in bed, with her husband's arms round her and the radio on. Then she made a cup of tea and went to bed, and slept for eleven hours.

In February, a video arrived on her phone. It was his father, sitting on a sofa in Birmingham with the hedgehog book open on his knee, and the baby, four months old now and fat as butter, propped against him. The father was doing the owl, badly.

Then he turned the page. The baby's legs began to go before anybody had said a word.

Isabel watched it eleven times. On the twelfth, her daughter was leaning on her shoulder, and when the hedgehog stamped his foot, the two of them said it together, out loud, in the kitchen.

Sit with this: What might we send with a child who will not stay with us, so the first part of their life goes too?

Things you might try

Let the picture go gently. Most of us carry a picture of a child before they come. If a scan, a diagnosis or simply the child themselves turns out different, give yourself permission to grieve the picture, as Jon and Kirsten did, with someone you trust, and keep saying the child's name while you do. Then leave one thing deliberately unfinished, a blank page at the front of a photo album or a bare patch of wall, for the child who actually arrives.

Say welcome out loud. Notice what a child on the way hears about themselves in your home: worry, silence, or their name said gladly. Be the first to say "welcome" out loud, as Callan did at the fridge. If you share a child's life online, ask what is theirs to keep: the pram wheel and the sunhat can go up, and the face can wait until they choose. And if a child will one day leave your care, keep a book

of the small things nobody else will remember, as Isabel did, and let it travel with them when they go.

Ask what they are like. Whenever strangers are about to meet a child you love, give them something to know the child by before anything else: their name, what they like, what calms them, what makes them laugh. A few lines about who the child already is can do more than you might expect. At home, start a list of what a new baby likes and does not like, and let the older children keep it.

Let others help. If someone offers to carry the shopping, sit with you, or leave a lasagne on your step, consider letting them. A child on the way can be the reason a street, a building or a family begins to talk to one another again. And if there is a parent-to-be near you who seems to be managing alone, perhaps you could be the one who knocks.

Give the older children a hook. When a new baby is coming into a family that already has children in it, step-children or cousins or foster children, find a way for each of them to put up something of their own for the welcome. Something that will last, and that everyone will see, even if it goes in a little crooked.

Your story

Think back to a time a child was on the way in your life. Perhaps it was your own, or a sister's, or a neighbour's. Perhaps you were the child, and only heard about it years later. What was said in the house before they came? Who moved the scan photograph to the middle of the fridge, or carried a box down from the loft, or knocked on a door with a tin of biscuits? Stay with that moment for a while. Whose face do you see?

CHAPTER 2

Getting Ready Ourselves

Before we prepare the room, we prepare the one who will stand in it.

Before a child arrives, someone gets ready. A father paints a box room on a Sunday afternoon. A grandmother clears her diary for the spring. A teacher spends the last week of August lying awake, wondering who will walk through the classroom door in September and whether she will be enough for them. Most of this getting ready is outward, and nearly all of it is love.

This chapter is about the getting ready that happens underneath.

One spring morning on an ordinary street, a young man was kneeling on the pavement, trying to fold a new pram. It was still shiny, with the cardboard corners only just off it, and he had the instruction leaflet held in his teeth. He pressed a button and the hood collapsed. He pressed another and one of the wheels came off in his hand. He put the wheel back, read the leaflet again, and tried a third time, then a fourth.

On the sixth or seventh try, the whole thing folded down with a neat click, exactly as it was meant to. He stood up. And then he did something worth staying with for a moment. He did not put it into the boot of his car. He unfolded it again, very slowly, and stood there on the pavement with one hand resting on the handle, looking down into the empty pram.

He stayed like that for perhaps half a minute. Nobody passing could have said what he was thinking. Perhaps it was the look of someone who has just realised that the practical part is the easy part, and that the real question is not whether he can fold a pram but who he would be when there was someone in it.

You do not have to be finished before a child comes to you. Hardly any of us are. You may be awake in some rooms of your life and still asleep in others, healed in places and still sore in others, and none of it disqualifies you from love. What helps a child is not a perfect adult. It is an adult who knows their own weather and does not pour it over the people they love. An adult who is willing to keep growing, alongside the child, for as long as it takes.

That kind of getting ready rarely shows. It happens in a phone call you have been putting off, in a habit you decide not to hand on, in a question you finally ask an old relative before it is too late.

And somewhere in all the getting ready, it helps to remember whose life it will be. You will hold this child, feed them, protect them, teach them and stay up with them through long nights. You will not own them. They are entrusted to you for a while, as you were once entrusted to someone else.

Some people will tell you that you cannot get ready for a child at all: it simply happens to you, and you catch up as best you can. They are half right. Nobody gets ready for everything, and nobody should have to get ready alone. But there is a kind of preparing that nobody else can do for you, and it usually starts with a small, uncomfortable question about yourself. The people in the stories that follow were not finished either. They were willing, and most of them had help.

As for the young man with the pram, after a while he folded it again, first time, and put it in the boot. Then he got into the driver's seat and sat there for a minute with the engine off before he drove away.

10

Eyes on Me

Kelly got her class list on the last Friday in July and read it on the bus home to her flat in Stoke. Twenty-eight names. Year 3. Her first class of her own.

Most of the names were just names. One came with a note from the headteacher clipped to the back: *Mason's file is in the office if you'd like to read it over the summer. He had a difficult Year 2.*

She read it the following week in the empty staffroom. It was thick. *Leaves the classroom without permission. Hides under furniture. Does not respond to instructions given to the whole class. Pinches when crowded in the line. Chews his sleeves.* There was a sticker chart that had been abandoned after eleven days.

She did not sleep well for the rest of August.

She got ready for him the way she had been taught. She laminated a reward chart with his name on it. She put his seat at the table nearest her desk and furthest from the door. She wrote down a script from a behaviour course, three short sentences in a firm, calm voice, and practised them in the bathroom mirror until her flatmate knocked to ask who she was talking to.

On the first morning Mason came to the line last, holding his mum's hand right up to the line. He was small for seven, with a buzz cut and a school jumper so new it still had the fold marks in it. The cuffs were already wet.

"He'll be all right," his mum said, not quite to Kelly, and let go.

Inside, it went the way first mornings go. Chairs scraped. Someone cried about a lunchbox. The noise rose, and rose, and Kelly felt her own voice climbing to meet it, and before she had decided to, she heard herself say, loud and high, the thing every teacher she had ever had used to say: "Year 3. Eyes on me."

The room went quiet. And Mason slid off his chair and under the table.

He did it smoothly, the way you might step out of the rain, and sat with his knees up and his back against the table leg and his sleeve in his mouth, and looked out at the forest of legs.

Kelly had the script ready. She had practised it. She opened her mouth to say the first sentence and found that she could not.

Because she knew exactly what it was like under there.

She knew the grey underside of a school table, the hard knots of old chewing gum. She knew how the room sounded from down

there, muffled and further off, as if you had put your head under the bath water. She had spent most of a year under a table, at seven, in Mrs Henshaw's class, at a school three miles from this one. She had not thought about it in years.

She thought, *Somewhere there was a file about me too.*

And she understood, with twenty-seven faces turned towards her, that it was not Mason she had been dreading all summer. It was the girl under the table. She had laminated a chart and practised a script so that she would never have to be that girl again, and the first thing she had done in her own classroom was use the very voice that had sent her under there.

She did not crouch down and coax him out. She remembered that too, how much worse it was when someone did that.

Instead she sat down on the carpet at the front, cross-legged, with the register on her knee, and said quietly, "Shall we do the register down here? Come and sit on the carpet if you like. Or stay where you are. I'll find you."

Most of them came. She called the names softly enough that they had to stop wriggling to hear. When she got to Mason's, she said it at the same quiet pitch as everyone else's, and from under the table by the window, after a moment, a voice said, "Here."

That evening she rang her mum, who still lived in the house Kelly had grown up in.

"Mum," she said. "The year I was in Mrs Henshaw's. Why did I hide?"

There was a long pause on the line. "It was a loud year at home, love," her mum said at last. "You remember." And then, carefully, "I always wondered if you did."

They talked for an hour, Kelly sitting on the kitchen floor with her back against the cupboard, because it felt like the right place for it.

The next morning, before the bell, she took the laminated chart off the wall and put it in her drawer. Then she went to find Bev, who looked after the children who needed extra help, and asked whether the three of them, with Mason's mum, could sit down that week.

"Not about the hiding," she said. "About what he needs." Bev already had a page of notes from Year 2.

Then the children came in, loud and damp from the playground, and Kelly stood at the front and did not raise her voice. She began to speak, very softly, about what they would do that day. One by one, the children nearest her stopped talking so that they could hear. Then the next table. Then the next.

And under the table by the window, where he had gone again the moment he came in, Mason leaned out from the edge, so that he could hear her too.

Sit with this: Is there a child you have found yourself dreading? What might that feeling be telling you?

11

The Top Pocket

Stan was sixty when Joanne told him, sitting on the edge of the bath with the test in her hand, that she was pregnant.

He had been a plasterer in Wigan for forty-four years. He had a bad shoulder, a grown-up son called Rob from his first marriage, two grandsons, and a partner of six years who was forty-one and had been told by more than one doctor that it was probably too late. They had stopped hoping without ever quite saying so. Now Joanne sat on the edge of the bath and laughed and cried at the same time, and Stan sat on the closed lid of the toilet and held her hand and thought, very clearly, *I'll be seventy-six when this one does their GCSEs.*

Then he went out into the garden, down by the shed, and had a cigarette.

He had been having a cigarette by the shed for most of his life. He did it when the football was bad and when it was good, after rows and after dinner, when his first marriage ended and when his mother died. It was where he went.

Joanne found him there. She did not tell him off. She just stood in the kitchen doorway in her dressing gown and said, "When did you last see a doctor, Stan?"

He thought about it. He honestly did not know. Before Rob's youngest was born. Ten years, maybe more. He had not been ill. He had not wanted to be told anything.

"Go," said Joanne.

So he went. The surgery offered him a health check, and he sat in a little room while a nurse took his blood pressure, frowned, and took it again. It was high. His cholesterol was high. She asked how many he smoked a day and he told her, and then, because she waited, he told her the real number.

"Right," she said, not unkindly. "Let's get you sorted, then. You've got a reason now."

He came home with tablets for his blood pressure, a leaflet about stopping smoking and an appointment for the following Tuesday. He put the leaflet on the fridge. Joanne read it twice and left it where it was, which he appreciated.

The stopping was hard. He had known it would be, but not like this. It was not the craving so much as the gap. Every time something happened, good or bad, his feet took him towards the back door and his hand went to his top pocket, and there was nothing there but a packet of nicotine gum and, after the twenty-week scan, a folded photograph he kept forgetting about until his fingers found it.

But the health check was not the hard part. The hard part was the thing Joanne had not asked him to do, the thing he had been circling for weeks.

On a Saturday in April he drove over to Rob's to help him put up a new fence. They worked along it panel by panel, mostly in silence, the way they always had. Rob was thirty-four now, a big quiet man with Stan's shoulders. Halfway along, while Stan held a panel straight and Rob drove in the screws, Stan said, without looking at him, "Can I ask you something?"

Rob grunted.

"Last time. With you. What did I get wrong?"

The drill stopped. Stan thought for a moment that Rob was not going to answer, and part of him hoped he wouldn't.

"You were always all right for the big stuff," Rob said at last. "You came to every match. You taught me to drive." He lined up the next screw. "But whenever anything kicked off, Dad, you went out the back. Every time. Mum crying, me crying, didn't matter. You went out the back with a fag and you came in when it was over." The drill whined and stopped. "I used to stand at the kitchen window and wait for you."

Stan held the panel steady and said nothing. There was nothing to say that would not have been an excuse.

"Sorry," said Rob, after a while. "You did ask."

"I did," said Stan. "Thank you."

The baby, a girl, was born in September. Joanne needed a caesarean and a slow recovery, and Stan learned to do everything, badly at first and then less badly. Rob brought the boys round, and they were alarmed to find they had an auntie younger than them.

One evening in October, at teatime, the baby began to cry and would not stop. The pans were on. Joanne was asleep upstairs. The crying rose, and Stan felt the old pull, as clear as a hand on his collar, towards the back door and the shed and the cold air.

His hand went to his top pocket. It found the gum, and the scan photograph, soft at the folds now.

He took his hand out of his pocket. He turned the pans down, picked up his daughter, and walked her up and down the kitchen, in full view of the window, until she was quiet.

Sit with this: Where do you go when things get hard? Is there someone who could tell you, honestly, what that was like for them?

12

At Her Height

Ffion had used a wheelchair since she was twenty-two, when a fall at a climbing centre in Shrewsbury damaged her spinal cord low in her back. By thirty-one she had a job in the council's planning office, a ground-floor flat with level access, a husband called Iwan who taught woodwork at the high school, and very little patience left for people who were surprised by any of it.

Then she got pregnant, and found she had to start being patient all over again.

Everybody had a question. Her mother-in-law asked, kindly, how she would manage the stairs, though there were no stairs. A woman in the queue at the chemist's, seeing the bump, said, "Oh, good for you," in the voice people use for a dog that has learned a trick. The first midwife she saw spoke mostly to Iwan. Her own mother, who loved her, sent her an article about nanny agencies.

And Ffion, to her own surprise, found herself answering every one of them. She explained. She reassured. She asked her consultant at the specialist clinic whether she would be allowed to try for a vaginal birth, whether she would be allowed to hold the baby straight away, whether it would be all right for her to be on her own with the baby in the day. The consultant, a brisk woman who had looked after many mothers with spinal injuries, answered properly: about the signs of labour Ffion might not feel, about her skin and her bladder, about planning ahead. But Ffion noticed that she kept asking the next question in the same small voice.

It was Iwan who said, "Let's just make the room."

They spent the spring on it. Iwan measured everything from her chair, not from his own height. The changing table went at the height of her armrests, with the space underneath left clear for her knees. The drawers were shallow and pulled out sideways. The shelves were fixed low, and the top one, the only one he could reach, was left empty on purpose.

The cot was the hard part. Every cot in every shop opened from the top, which meant reaching up and over, which meant she could not lift a baby out without standing. So Iwan built one. He took a plain wooden cot and spent six weekends in the school workshop, with the head of department's blessing, fitting it with a side panel that slid open on runners and locked with a catch no baby could work. Ffion tested it with a two-kilo bag of flour wrapped in a towel: roll up, unlock, slide, lift, onto her lap, into the crook of her arm. A hundred times. Then a hundred more.

At thirty-four weeks the health visitor came. She was pleasant and thorough, and she stood in the doorway of the nursery and looked hard at the cot.

"I've not seen one like that," she said. "I'll need to check with my manager whether it meets the safety guidance. Would you mind if I took a photo?"

And Ffion felt the old words rising, as smooth as they always were. *Of course. Whatever you think is best. We can always change it.*

She heard them coming. She did not say them.

She thought of the six weekends. She thought of the bag of flour, and the stairs that did not exist, and the woman at the chemist's, and the small voice she had been using for seven months. She realised, sitting in the doorway of a room built entirely around her, that she had spent her whole pregnancy asking people whether she was allowed to be this baby's mother. Nobody had once asked Iwan.

"Take a photo," she said. "Take as many as you like. But I'd rather you watched."

She rolled to the cot. She unlocked the catch, slid the side open, lifted the bag of flour in its towel onto her lap and into the crook of her arm, and slid the side shut, all in about the time it takes to say it. Then she did it again, slower, so the health visitor could see how the catch worked.

The health visitor watched. Then she put her phone away.

"Well," she said. "You're quicker at that than I'd be. The handling isn't what I'm worried about. You know what you're doing." She looked at the runners. "It's the cot itself. Anything home-made needs

checking properly, the gaps, the mattress fit, that catch. Same as I'd say to anyone."

"It is fine," said Ffion. "I tested it."

"Then you won't mind someone testing it again."

Ffion found, a little to her own annoyance, that she didn't. The occupational therapist came the following week with a tape measure and a set of gauges and went over the cot against the safety standard for cots: the space between the bars, the gap round the mattress, the runners, the catch. She found one gap at the bottom of the sliding panel that was wider than it should be, and asked for a second catch that a small hand could never reach. Iwan fixed both that weekend. The therapist came back, measured again and signed it off. Then she asked Ffion to show her the lift, and watched it twice, and said, "I'll be stealing that for other mums."

Their daughter was born in August, at the county hospital, with a birth plan in which Ffion had written every word herself. They called her Seren, and she was loud.

On her fourth night home she woke at ten past three, hungry and furious. Ffion woke too. She moved from the bed to her chair in the dark without switching on the light, because she had practised that as well, and rolled the three metres to the cot. Catch. Slide. Lift. Her daughter, warm and outraged and real, came up onto her lap and into the crook of her arm and found what she was looking for.

On the far side of the bed, Iwan slept through the whole thing.

That, Ffion thought, with the baby feeding and the house dark and quiet around them, was rather the point.

Sit with this: Where in looking after a child do you find yourself asking permission? What would your home look like if it were built at your own height?

13

Cold Water

Jamie had worked in restaurant kitchens since he was sixteen, and for the last six years he had been head chef in a busy place on the seafront in Brighton. He was good at it. He was fast and inventive and fierce, and in the heat of a Saturday night service he shouted, as every chef he had ever worked under had shouted, and nobody minded much, because that was kitchens.

When his partner Ada, who was a paramedic, became pregnant, they sat down with a calculator and a lot of tea and worked out that it made more sense for him to stay at home. Her job had the better pay and the pension. His had the hours that no baby could live with. He handed in his notice and cooked his last service.

He was not worried about the nappies or the night feeds. He had done harder things, faster, on less sleep.

What worried him happened on an ordinary Tuesday, about a month before the birth. He was trying to open a jar of pickled lemons, and the lid would not shift, and he banged it on the worktop, and it still would not shift, and before he knew what he was doing he had shouted at it, properly, the way he shouted at a commis who had burnt the shallots. The dog left the room. Ada, on the sofa with her feet up, went very quiet.

It was the quiet that got him. He knew that quiet. It was the quiet his mother had gone into, when his father shouted.

That night he lay awake. The next day he did something he had never done in his life. He phoned the GP surgery and asked whether there was anybody he could talk to about his temper, and then, because the receptionist was kind, he told her it was because he was going to be a dad. She found him a counsellor, and a group for new fathers that met on Thursday evenings above a bike shop, and he went to both.

The counsellor asked him what he did, in the kitchen, when he burnt himself.

"Cold water," said Jamie. "Straight under the tap. Twenty minutes if it's bad."

"Why?"

"Takes the heat out. Stops it going deeper."

She looked at him. He looked back. And then he laughed, because it was so obvious, and she laughed too.

So that became his practice. Not a cure, and he never thought it was. When he felt the heat rise, the tight jaw, the thudding in his ears, he went to the nearest tap and ran cold water over the insides of his wrists and counted slowly to thirty. Ada learned the signs before he did. Sometimes she would just say, "Wrists," from across the room.

Their son Hugo was born in October. For the first three weeks he was easy, and Jamie began to think he had worried for nothing.

Then came a Wednesday afternoon when Ada was on a twelve-hour shift and Hugo, eight weeks old, would not stop screaming. He had been fed. He had been changed. He had been walked and driven round the block and held in every position Jamie knew. And Jamie, trying to make up a fresh bottle one-handed with a red, rigid baby on his shoulder, knocked the steriliser off the side, and boiling water went everywhere, across the worktop and the floor, missing them both by inches, and he felt it coming up through his chest like a pan about to boil over.

The man at the new fathers' group had told them a thing they could do, a thing Jamie had written on the back of his hand once, in biro, to remember. *It's all right to put the baby down.*

He carried Hugo upstairs and laid him on his back in the cot, still screaming. He checked there was nothing in the cot with him. He went out, pulled the door almost shut, and walked downstairs to the kitchen sink.

He turned on the cold tap. He held his wrists under it. Upstairs his son was screaming and every cell in Jamie's body wanted to run, either up the stairs or out of the house, and he did neither. He stood at the sink and counted. Ten. Twenty. The water was very cold. At thirty, he found he could hear the fridge humming, and a seagull on the roof, and Hugo, still crying, but no longer the enemy.

He turned off the tap. He did not dry his hands.

He went upstairs and lifted his son out of the cot and held him against his chest, and Hugo, outraged, kept on crying for another ten minutes. But Jamie's hands were steady, and his wrists were cold and wet against the back of his son's hot little neck, and he walked him up and down the landing, slowly, and did not mind how long it took.

Sit with this: What is your own kind of heat, and what helps it cool before it goes deeper?

14

What She Swore At

Kayleigh's mum died when Kayleigh was eight, of a bleed on the brain, on an ordinary Tuesday, with no warning at all.

What Kayleigh had of her after that was not much. A few photographs. A recipe for corned beef hash in her handwriting. A feeling, more than a memory, of being carried somewhere at night with her face against a coat. Her dad, Cliff, had brought her up on his own in their house in Halifax, and he had done it well, but he did not talk about Stacey. He would answer a question if you asked one, briefly, and then find something that needed doing in the garage. After a while Kayleigh stopped asking.

At thirty-one, five months pregnant with her first, she started to want her mother in a way that frightened her. Not in a grand way. In small ways. She wanted to know whether her mum had been sick all the way through, too. Whether she had held babies on her shoulder or in her arms. Whether she had sung, and what. She found herself standing in the baby aisle at the supermarket, close to tears, because she did not know which way her mother would have folded a muslin.

There was one photograph she kept in a frame by her bed: her mum at about twenty, laughing on a sea wall, next to a red-haired girl in a denim jacket. On the back, in biro: *Me and Morag, Bridlington, 1989.*

It took Kayleigh a week of searching online, and two wrong Morags, to find her. She was in Bradford, a grandmother now, with short grey hair and the same face. Kayleigh wrote her a long message and deleted it and wrote a short one. *I think you knew my mum. I'm having a baby and I don't know anything.*

Morag replied within the hour. *Come for your tea. Saturday. I've been waiting twenty-three years for somebody to ask.*

She lived in a terraced house with a dog who leaned on everybody's legs. She opened the door, took one look at Kayleigh and said, "Oh, God, you've got her chin," and then they were both crying on the doorstep with the dog leaning on them, and it was easier after that.

They sat in Morag's kitchen for four hours.

Morag told her that Stacey had held babies over her left shoulder, always the left, high up, so they could look out at the room. "She said you were nosy from day one. You'd scream if she held you facing in. You wanted to see what was going on." She showed her, with a cushion off the settee, patting it low on the back, firm and steady, like someone knocking on a door they knew would open.

She told her that Stacey had sung "Total Eclipse of the Heart" to every baby she ever held, all of it, the whole song, including the bits where you have to shout. "Badly," said Morag. "Really badly. Babies loved it."

And she told her what Stacey swore at. The twin tub. The number 17 bus, which never came. Every pushchair ever made, but especially the one Cliff's mother had bought them, which folded up only when it felt like it. "She'd be out on the pavement," said Morag, "kicking it, calling it every name under the sun, and you in the sling laughing your head off."

Kayleigh laughed until she had to put her hand on her bump.

She came away with the cushion, which Morag made her take, and a carrier bag of photographs Morag had kept in a shoebox in the wardrobe for twenty-three years. She drove back over the tops and went round to her dad's on the way home. She had meant only to

drop in. She ended up spreading the photographs across his kitchen table.

Cliff looked at them, one after another, and did not reach for any of them. Kayleigh waited for him to get up and go out to the garage. He didn't.

"Morag says she sang you 'Total Eclipse of the Heart'," Kayleigh said. "The whole thing."

Her dad picked up a photograph of Stacey on a beach with a baby on her left shoulder, high up, facing out.

"No," he said slowly. "It wasn't that. That was for other people's babies. For you it was 'Islands in the Stream'." He cleared his throat. "She made me do the Kenny Rogers bit."

He put the photograph down very carefully, as if it might break. Then, at his own kitchen table, sixty-three years old, with his eyes on his wife and his daughter in a picture he had not seen in twenty-three years, and his voice cracking on the low notes, Cliff began to sing it.

> *Sit with this:* Who still carries a piece of someone your family has lost? What small, ordinary thing would you most like to know, and who might still remember it?

15

The Harbour Wall

Every night since he was fifteen, Patrick had sat on the harbour wall.

It was where everyone went. In a small town on the Cornish coast, out of season, there was nowhere else. Half a dozen of them, sometimes more, sitting in a line with their backs to the boats and their feet dangling over the slipway, passing cans and a phone with music on it, until the cold or the police sent them home. Patrick was twenty now, and worked part-time at the chip shop. He was not in trouble, exactly. But he could see where the wall went, because he could see the older men who still sat on it, and his own father had been one of them, on and off, before he went off for good.

When Barbara told him she was pregnant, in the bus shelter by the Co-op, he said, "Right," and then, a whole bus later, "Right, OK," and then he walked her home and went down to the wall.

He sat there that night and every night for a fortnight, and told nobody, and drank less than usual, and looked at the water.

What decided him was not anything that happened. It was a sum. He was sitting on the wall, and he worked out that if the baby was born in June, then in fifteen years, when the baby was the age he had been when he first sat here, he would be thirty-five. He looked along the wall at Richard's uncle, who was thirty-five, sitting at the far end in the same jacket he wore every night, and something in Patrick went very cold and very clear.

He climbed down off the wall. Richard said, "Where you off?" and Patrick said, "Home," and they all laughed, because it was half past nine.

He did not make a speech about it, because he was not sure yet that he could do it, and he did not want to be laughed at twice. He just did not go down to the wall the next night, or the one after. He went to Barbara's mum's, where Barbara lived, and sat in the kitchen and was awkward, and Barbara's mum, who did not think much of him, made him a cup of tea anyway and watched him over it.

Some nights were easy. Some were not. On a Friday in March the lads phoned him six times and he sat on his bed with the phone face down on the duvet, buzzing, and felt like the loneliest person in Cornwall.

He went to the boatyard on the other side of the harbour and asked if they needed anyone. They did not. He went back the next week and asked again. The week after that, the old man who ran it, Mr Pascoe, told him to come in on Saturday and sweep up and they would see. He swept up. He came back. He learned to sand down a hull and paint it, and Mr Pascoe started paying him, not much, and then a bit more.

The baby was born at the end of June, a boy, at the hospital in Truro. Patrick held him in the corridor while they were cleaning Barbara up, and the baby looked at him with that unfocused navy-

blue stare that newborns have, and Patrick thought, *I don't know what I'm doing*, and then, *I know where I'm not going to be*, and the second thought was steadier than the first.

In August, the council found Barbara and the baby a flat above the bakery on the hill, and Patrick moved in with them. From its back window you could see the whole harbour.

One evening in September, when the baby was ten weeks old, Patrick walked down to the quay for the first time in months, to fetch a tin of varnish he had left at the yard. On the way back he passed the wall. They were there, the same as ever. Richard raised a can. Patrick raised a hand. He did not stop.

A fortnight later, Richard turned up at the boatyard on a Saturday morning with his hood up, and stood around for a while looking at the boats, and then asked Mr Pascoe, not quite looking at him, whether there was any sweeping up that wanted doing.

That night Patrick stood at the back window of the flat with his son asleep on his shoulder. Down on the harbour wall the little lights were still there, a few fewer than before. And up on the hill, behind him, the lamp in the room where his son slept was on, small and yellow, the kind of light that could be seen from the wall, if anyone down there happened to look up.

Sit with this: What would you want the child in your life never to have to grow up inside? Is there a decision you have been circling?

16

Hands in Her Pockets

Elaine had fostered babies for nineteen years. She had a cot that had been slept in by forty-one of them, and a drawer of tiny vests in every size, and a way of holding a newborn against her shoulder that her own grown-up daughters said could calm a car alarm.

The baby who came to her in November was nine days old, a girl, small and long-fingered and very hungry. Her mother was Rita, who

was seventeen and living in a residential unit for young people forty minutes away across the city, and who had been judged, for now, not able to look after her. Everyone would have preferred a placement where Rita and the baby could stay together, and the social worker was still looking for one, but there was no such place free that winter. There would be a plan. There would be contact three times a week at the family centre. There might, if things went well, be a return home. Everyone was careful to say "might".

Elaine knew that in the first weeks, without anyone meaning it, the baby would begin to belong to her. That was what babies did. They attached themselves to whoever was there at three in the morning. She had no quarrel with that. What she had learned, over nineteen years, was that it was her job to belong to the baby completely and, at the same time, to keep the door open behind her.

So she did small things. Elaine had asked the social worker to bring something Rita had worn, and she came with a grey hoodie that smelt strongly of Rita's body spray. Elaine kept it on the arm of the chair where she did the night feeds, and put it round her own shoulders when she fed the baby. She asked the social worker for a photograph of Rita, and put it on the fridge, at the height of a carer's eyes when she is warming a bottle.

And she kept a notebook, a cheap one, in which she wrote down everything the baby did. When she fed and how much. When she slept. What made her cry and what stopped it. That she liked her feet held. That she hated the hat with the bobble. At every contact, Elaine gave the notebook to Rita.

The contact sessions were hard. Rita was frightened and trying not to show it, and when she was frightened she was rude. She held the baby stiffly, as if she were a parcel that might go off. She called Elaine "the foster woman" to the contact worker within Elaine's hearing. And the baby, who spent the days between visits with Elaine, often cried in her mother's arms.

It came to a head in the third week. The baby was crying, red-faced and arching, and Rita had tried everything she could think of, which was not much, and finally she turned and held the baby out, at

arm's length, towards Elaine. Her face was white. "You do it," she said. "She wants you."

Elaine's arms wanted to take the baby. Nineteen years of habit wanted it. It would have been so easy, and the crying would have stopped, and everyone in the room would have been relieved.

Elaine put her hands in her coat pockets.

"She doesn't want me, love," she said. "She wants feeding, and she wants her feet held. Look at page four." She nodded at the notebook on the table. "I'll warm the bottle. You hold her feet."

Rita stared at her. Then, still holding the baby awkwardly out in front of her, she pulled her back in against her chest, and reached down with her free hand, and found the small kicking feet, and held them, both together, in her palm.

The crying did not stop at once. But it changed. And when Elaine came back with the bottle, she handed it to Rita without a word and went and sat on the far side of the room, her hands in her pockets, and looked out of the window at the car park and did not watch.

It was another seven months before the baby went home, to a mother-and-baby flat with a support worker in the next building. Elaine went to every contact. She never once took the baby from Rita's arms unless Rita asked her to.

On the last morning, she packed the baby's things into two bags and a box. On the top of the box she put the notebook, which was nearly full, and the grey hoodie, washed now, and folded. Rita came to the door with the support worker. She took the baby, and she took the bags, and then she stood on the step for a moment, not sure what to say.

"Her feet," she said, in the end. "I still hold her feet."

"I know," said Elaine. She kept her hands in her pockets until the car had turned the corner.

Sit with this: When you care for a child in someone else's absence, how do you keep a place open for them? What might it cost you to keep your hands in your pockets?

17

The Engine Running

Harriet had been a community midwife in the same corner of North Yorkshire for twenty-six years. She had caught babies in farmhouses during snowstorms. She knew which farms had dogs and which had geese, and that the geese were worse.

And for the last few of those years, without ever quite noticing, she had kept her car engine running.

It began as a practical thing. Too many visits, too few midwives, a caseload that grew every year. She would pull up outside a house for a postnatal check, leave the engine ticking over to keep the heater going, run in, weigh the baby, check the stitches, fill in the notes, run out. Twelve minutes. Fifteen at most. The new mothers were grateful. They also, she knew, did not tell her the things they would have told someone who sat down.

She did not stop because of a crisis. She stopped because one morning in February, at the end of a lane above Pickering, she got out of the car and walked up a path to a front door and realised, with her hand raised to knock, that she could not remember the last house she had been to. Not the mother's name, not the baby, not the room. Nothing. She had been there an hour before.

She sat back in the car. She did not know for how long. The engine was still running.

Her GP signed her off. Her manager, who had trained alongside her, said, "Take it, Harriet. All of it. We'll manage." She took four months.

For the first weeks she slept. Then she started walking, the same lanes she had driven for twenty-six years, and found she had never actually seen them. The hedges. The curlews coming back to the moor in March. She went to the swimming pond on the edge of town that the bravest of the older women used year-round, and lowered herself, gasping, into the dark water, and came out feeling scoured and awake.

And she found herself, without meaning to, remembering. Not the births. The visits afterwards. A teenager in a caravan who had made her a cup of tea with three sugars because she thought that was what you did for visitors. A farmer's wife who had wept, out of nowhere, while Harriet was weighing the baby, because her own mother had died the year before and there was no one to show her. A father on a council estate in Scarborough who had read every book and wanted to talk her through all of them. She realised that what she remembered was never the fifteen minutes. It was the moments when she had stayed.

She went back in June, on a gentle return that she had worked out with her manager: short days at first, a smaller patch, and a newly qualified midwife called Jess who took the routine weighing on the far side of the moor. One of the empty posts had at last been filled. None of it made the work easy. It made it possible.

She kept almost everything she had known: the deft, unfussy hands, the way she could tell from a baby's colour across a room that something was not right, the bad jokes that made frightened women laugh in the middle of a contraction.

But she did one thing differently. At every house, she turned the engine off.

It was a small thing. It meant the car was cold when she came back to it. It meant, without anyone noticing, that she sat down instead of standing, and took her coat off, and said yes to the tea. It meant some visits took twenty-five minutes instead of fifteen. The new rota allowed for that, and kept an afternoon a week clear for notes, so that they were written at the clinic and not at her own kitchen table late at night.

On her second week back, she went to see a young mother in a terraced house in Malton, on day five, a woman she had met only once before. The baby was fine. The stitches were fine. Harriet sat down on the end of the sofa and took off her coat.

The young mother looked at her for a moment. Then she said, "Would you mind holding him while I have a shower? I haven't had

one since we got home." And then she burst into tears, and said, "Sorry, sorry, I don't know why I'm crying."

"Go and have your shower," said Harriet. "Take as long as you like. We'll be here."

So she sat in a stranger's front room with a five-day-old boy asleep on her chest, his breath warm and damp against her neck, and listened to the water running upstairs, and the mother crying a little under it, and then not crying. Through the front window she could see her own car parked at the kerb, quiet. Its engine ticked, now and then, as it cooled.

Sit with this: Where in your own life is the engine still running?

18

The Baby Who Visited the Classroom

A true story

In 1996, a Canadian educator named Mary Gordon began a programme in Toronto with an idea simple enough to sound unlikely. She called it Roots of Empathy.

It works like this. Throughout a school year, a local parent brings their baby into a primary school classroom, about once every three weeks. The baby is just two to four months old when the visits begin. A green blanket is spread on the floor. The parent sits on it with the baby, a trained instructor sits nearby, and the children sit in a circle around them, and watch.

That is almost all. And yet a great deal happens.

The children notice when the baby smiles, and when she frowns. They notice what she does with her hands, and where she looks, and what happens when her mother speaks to her. When she cries, they try to guess why. Is she hungry? Tired? Cross because she cannot reach the rattle? They measure how much she has grown since the last visit, and talk about what she can do now that she could not do before: hold her head up, roll over, sit, babble, reach.

Between the visits, the instructor helps them to turn what they have seen towards themselves. How do you feel when you cannot do something you want to do? What do you do when you are frightened? What do you think the boy next to you feels when nobody picks him for a team? The baby becomes a kind of key. Children who might never talk about their own feelings find they can talk about hers, and from there it is only a short step to their own, and to each other's.

The baby teaches without saying a word. The parent teaches, too, simply by how they hold her: the patience, the attention, the way they read her face and answer it.

The programme spread across Canada and then to other countries. Researchers have studied it. One large trial in Manitoba, led by the researcher Rob Santos and published in 2011, compared classrooms that had the programme with classrooms that did not, and found less aggression and more sharing and helping among the children who had taken part, at the end of the school year. Some of those differences were still there when the children were followed up in later years, though not all of them, and not in every group.

The numbers are one way of seeing it. Here is another. Imagine the scene: a circle of ten-year-olds, some of them the kind who are always in trouble, sitting cross-legged and very quiet around a blanket. A baby on her back, kicking. A boy who is usually the loudest in the room, perhaps, bending forward and whispering, *She's looking at me.*

Something else is happening in that circle, too. Children who learn to read an infant's face, to wait, to soothe and to wonder, are being prepared, years ahead of time, for something they cannot yet see. One day some of them will be parents. Some will be aunts and uncles, foster carers, teachers, nurses. Some will simply be the person in the supermarket queue who smiles at a crying baby instead of tutting. The getting ready for the next generation does not begin at conception. It begins wherever a child is first shown, gently, how to receive someone smaller than themselves.

The babies on the green blanket cannot speak, or walk, or even sit up. In classroom after classroom, they turn out to be some of the gentlest teachers the children have.

Sit with this: Where did you first learn to be gentle with someone smaller than you, and who showed you how?

Things you might try

Meet the child before the file. Before a new school year, a new baby or a new placement, read what you need to keep a child safe, then put the paperwork away and watch the actual child for a while. If one child fills you with dread before you have even met them, notice it kindly. Sometimes the dread is about us. Kelly had a chart and a script ready for Mason. What she needed to get ready was her own voice.

Get the grown-up ready too. Book the check-up you have been putting off. Ask the person who knows you best the question you have been circling: what did I get wrong last time? And if a room is going to be yours to work in, build it at your own height, not anyone else's. A child is helped more by an adult who has looked after themselves than by a perfect nursery.

Find your own cold water. Choose something small and simple that brings you back: cold water on your wrists, a stone in your pocket, a ring you can turn. When worry or temper rises, use it, slowly, and name three things you can see or hear. It will not fix everything. But it can bring you back to the face in front of you, which is where the child is. And if you are struggling, tell someone. It is the bravest kind of getting ready there is.

Go and ask for the missing stories. If there is a gap in your family's story, a parent who died, a grandparent nobody talks about, a way of doing things that stopped with someone, find the person who might still hold the memories, a relative or an old friend, and ask them, while you can. Write down what they tell you, or record it

on your phone. One day a child will want to know where they come from, and you will be able to tell them.

Your story

Think of someone who got ready for you, in a way you only understood years later: a light left on in the hall, a chair pulled out at the table. Or think of a time you got ready for someone else, and found that most of the work was happening inside you. Who helped you with it? What did you put down, or pick up, so that there would be room? Hold the memory for a while. It is yours.

CHAPTER 3

The Thread Between Us

The cord is cut within minutes. The thread it stands for goes on lengthening for the rest of a life.

On a raw afternoon in November, a young woman sits down on a bench beside the pond in the park. She has a newborn tied to her front in a stretchy wrap, and she is doing the thing new parents do, even sitting down, a slow rock back and forth that seems to start of its own accord and never quite stops.

The ducks come over hopefully and go away again. The wind comes across the water in little grey ripples, and if you look closely you can see that the baby has one hand out of the wrap and is holding on to the woman's little finger. Not loosely. With the whole fist, the way a climber holds a rope.

After a few minutes the rocking does its work and the baby falls asleep. The small fist slackens, the way they do, until it is hardly holding anything at all. The woman does not take her finger away. She leaves it exactly where it is, resting in that open hand, and goes on watching the ducks as though nothing has happened.

It is the finger, not the pond, that stays with you.

It seems to me that it holds most of what this chapter wants to say. Between a child and the people who love them there is a bond, and it begins earlier than we think: in the months of waiting, in voices heard through a wall of skin, in habits nobody planned. At first the child does most of the holding, with everything they have. Our part is quieter. We stay where we can be found. We keep a hand where a small one can reach it. We do not close our fingers round theirs and squeeze.

That last part matters, because love has a way of tightening when it is frightened. Watching turns into worrying, and worrying turns into deciding everything on a child's behalf, until closeness begins to feel, from the inside, like control. The bond worth having holds a child close without holding them tight. It joins two people and leaves both of them free.

Nobody is required to feel it on cue. Some parents feel a great rush of love at the first grainy scan. Some feel very little until weeks after the birth, and are then caught off guard by it at three in the morning, over a bottle, in a kitchen lit only by the fridge. Both are ordinary. If you are expecting a child and are quietly afraid that you do not feel what you are supposed to feel, you can put that fear down here. This bond is not an emotion you have to produce. It grows out of small, patient things: attention, a habit of talking to someone who cannot yet answer, a willingness to notice what you sense without having to explain it.

It is made, too, by more people than the old picture allows. Most children thrive on two kinds of care. One is warm and receiving: the lap, the song, the arms that say, you belong here. The other is steady and directing: the clear course, the safe edge, the voice that says, this is how we live, and I will keep you safe while you learn it. A child needs both. A child does not necessarily need two people to bring them. A single mother can carry both. So can a farmer, an uncle, a neighbour on the floor below.

None of it has to be done well from the start, and none of it has to be done alone. Some of the people who make this bond get there late, or sideways, or by a road nobody would have chosen. Some have no title at all, only a habit of turning up. What they share is smaller and more ordinary than devotion. They keep coming back to the same place, at the same hour, with the same few words, until a child knows where to find them.

19

The Count

Damian kept four hundred ewes on the hill above the village, and for three weeks every spring he barely slept.

That year the lambing and the baby were due together. Katherine had worked it out on the calendar in the back kitchen and laughed, and Damian had not laughed, because he could see exactly how it would go. He would be in the lambing shed from five in the morning until midnight, and his wife would be in the farmhouse on her own with her ankles up on a cushion.

He was not a talker. His own father had held each of his children once, at the christening, for the photograph, and then handed them back. Damian had grown up thinking that babies were something that happened in the house, among the women, while the men were out. He did not believe it any more, not exactly. But he did not know what else to believe, and so he left the question alone.

What he did, every night, was come in at midnight with his hands still smelling of iodine and tell Katherine the count. She was always awake by then, because the baby was always awake by then, and she would be on the sofa under a blanket with the television on low. He would stand in the doorway in his socks and say it the way his father had said it to his grandfather.

"Thirty-one. Two sets of twins. The old ewe with the torn ear had a single, big lad. Lost none. All's well."

It was the same every night. The total, the twins, any trouble, and then "all's well", whether it was or not.

About a week in, Katherine said, "Tell the baby."

"Tell it what?"

"The count. Tell the baby."

He felt a fool. But he knelt down on the rug, because she asked, and said it again, lower, close to the bump, in the same flat, careful voice. "Thirty-one. Two sets of twins. Lost none. All's well."

Under his hand something moved, turned, and went still.

After that he told the baby every night. He did not think of it as anything. It was simply where the count went now.

Their son was born in the last week of lambing, in the hospital forty minutes down the valley. Damian was there for all of it, and then, eight hours later, he was back in the shed with a ewe in trouble, because a neighbour could cover a night but not two. He hated it. He did not say so.

On the third day Katherine came home, and by the afternoon the farmhouse was full. Her mother, her two sisters, an aunt with a cake, the cousin who had driven up from Hereford. The baby was passed from lap to lap like the parcel in a party game, and by teatime he had had enough. He cried. He went red and stiff and cried, and nothing anybody did made any difference. Katherine's mother tried. Each sister tried. Katherine, exhausted, tried and started to cry herself.

Damian came in from the shed at dusk. He stood in the kitchen doorway, muddy to the knee, and did not come any further, because of his hands and because the room was full of women who all seemed to know what they were doing.

Katherine looked up at him over the noise.

And out of pure habit, because it was the end of the day and that was what came out of his mouth at the end of the day, Damian said, "Fifty-three. Four sets of twins. Lost none. All's well."

The baby stopped.

He did not stop the way babies stop when they are simply worn out. He stopped the way a person stops when someone they know comes into a room. His head turned, wobbling, on that thin neck. Not quite to the door. But towards it.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Katherine's mother said, "Well. Would you look at that."

Damian went to the sink. He washed his hands slowly and very thoroughly, with his back to the room, until he was sure of his face. Then he dried them on the tea towel, crossed the kitchen, and held out his arms, and Katherine's sister put his son into them.

Doctors will tell you that a newborn knows the voices it heard most in the womb, and there is no need to claim anything more than

that. Nobody needed to. A man who did not think babies were his business had been reporting to his son every night for a fortnight, and his son had been listening.

The lambing finished. In summer there was nothing to count in the sheds. But at midnight, Damian still stood by the cot in his socks, and found something.

"Swallows in the barn. Nine. All's well."

Sit with this: What small habit of yours might a child already know you by?

20

Six Floors

The lift in Rosalind's block worked about half the time, and never on the days it mattered.

She was seven months pregnant the first time she met Herbert properly. She had been to the big supermarket and was on the fourth-floor landing, with four bags and two floors still to go, resting her forehead against the cold wall. A door opened on the floor above and an old man in a brown cardigan came down, looked at her, looked at the bags, and picked up two without asking.

"I'm on the fifth," he said. "I'll take them up to yours. You take your time."

He was seventy-eight, a widower, and had mended shoes in a little shop on the parade for thirty-six years, back when people still had their shoes mended. He climbed the stairs one at a time, with a rest on each landing, and talked the whole way about the weather, which he had views on. At her door he put the bags down, nodded at her bump, and said, "Morning, young man."

"It might be a girl."

"Then I'll apologise," said Herbert, "when I've been introduced."

After that he seemed to know when she went shopping. She suspected him of watching from his window. She never caught him at it.

The baby was a boy. Rosalind called him Henry, and when she brought him home the lift was broken, and Herbert was waiting on the ground floor. She carried Henry and Herbert carried the folded pram, step by step, landing by landing, all six floors, stopping on each one to get his breath and say something rude about the council.

It became their arrangement. Every morning she was going out, Rosalind knocked on Herbert's door at ten past eight. He would be ready in his coat. He took the pram down and she took Henry. At the bottom he unfolded the pram with a great clatter, bent over the hood, and said, "Morning, young man," and then went back up on his own, very slowly, to his radio and his crossword.

The baby's father was not around and was not going to be. Rosalind's own mother lived in Spain. There was a friend from work, and a cousin who rang. And there was Herbert, every morning, at ten past eight.

At the nine-month check, the health visitor went through her form. "And who else is important in Henry's life?"

Rosalind hesitated. "There's Herbert," she said. "He's a neighbour."

The health visitor wrote it down, and Rosalind found that she was glad it was written somewhere.

In February Herbert slipped on the ice by the bins and broke his hip.

For the first few days Rosalind managed. The lift was working, mostly. But on the third morning, at about ten past eight, the stairwell door banged on the floor below, the way it did when anybody used it, and Henry, who was ten months old and had lately become a speedy, determined crawler, stopped what he was doing on the rug. He turned round. He set off across the floor towards the front door, sat down in front of it, and waited.

He did the same the next morning. And the next.

On the Saturday Rosalind put him in the pram and took two buses to the hospital.

Herbert was in a bay of six beds by the window, looking smaller than she had ever seen him, in a gown instead of a cardigan. He had

not shaved. He told her he was fine and that he would be home in no time, and then he told her that they had said something about a frame, and that the stairs might be the end of him, and that he did not see how he could carry anything ever again.

Henry, meanwhile, had got hold of the bedrail. He pulled himself up on it, wobbled, held on with both fists, and stared at Herbert with great seriousness from about a foot away.

"Ba," said Henry.

"Is that my name now?" said Herbert. He had to blow his nose on a paper towel from the trolley. "That's my name, is it."

He came home in March with a walking frame and a care plan and strict instructions about the stairs. He could not carry a pram. He could not carry a bag of shopping. He said, on the first morning, that he supposed that was that, then.

But at ten past eight Rosalind went down one flight with Henry on her hip and knocked anyway. Herbert opened the door in his cardigan, leaning on the frame.

She had brought a kitchen chair down from her flat. She put it on the landing beside his door, and he lowered himself into it, and she set Henry down on the lino by the stairwell.

Henry looked at the chair. He let go of his mother's hand. He took one step, and then another, and then four more, rocking like a sailor, the whole width of the landing.

He arrived at Herbert's knees, and held on.

"Morning, young man," said Herbert.

Sit with this: Who, with no title at all, has been part of a child's first year in your life? Has anyone ever written their name down anywhere?

21

Dear Bean

Darren went to prison when Melissa was ten weeks pregnant.

He had done something stupid one night, with people he should not have been with, and he never once pretended it was anything

other than stupid. The judge gave him two and a half years. He would not serve all of it, his solicitor said. He would be released automatically, in about fifteen months. The baby was due in about seven months.

They had seen one scan together. On the blurred grey picture the baby looked, Melissa said, like a kidney bean, and from then on that was its name.

The phone calls were short and expensive and never at the right time. Visits were twice a month, in a hall full of plastic chairs and vending machines, with an officer at the end of every row. So in the second week, in a cell that smelled of other people's socks, Darren sat down with a pad of lined paper and wrote a letter. Not to Melissa. He wrote to her as well, but this one was for the baby.

Dear Bean, it began. *Today it was fish for tea, which was a crime in itself. The man next door snores like a moped. There is a pigeon on the yard with one foot and he gets more bread than anyone. I'm sorry I'm in here. Your dad.*

It was one side of a page. He wrote one every week, and every Sunday evening Melissa sat on the sofa with her feet up and her hand on the bump and read that week's letter aloud. She felt silly the first time. By the fourth time she had stopped feeling silly. By the tenth she found herself saving it up all week, the envelope propped against the kettle, waiting for Sunday.

Bean was a girl, and she was born on a Thursday at four in the morning. Darren heard the next day on a two-minute phone call, standing in a corridor, with a queue behind him. He went back to his cell and sat on the bed until the light went off the wall. Nothing anybody could say would give him back that day, and he knew it. That grief never entirely went. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

The letters kept coming. Melissa kept reading them, now with the baby on her knee, on the sofa, every Sunday evening. *Dear Bean. Today I got a job in the kitchens. I am now an expert in potatoes.*

Melissa brought her to visits. The baby cried in the hall. She cried at the noise, and the strange hands, and at the man in the grey sweatshirt who held her as though she were made of glass. She cried

until Melissa took her back. Darren laughed and said it was fine. On the way back to his cell he punched nothing and nobody, and lay on his bunk, and did not sleep.

He came home on a Tuesday in early spring. Bean was nearly eight months old. She was sitting on a blanket on the living-room floor with a plastic cup, and when he came in through the door she looked at him with Melissa's eyes and then turned her whole body round so that she was facing the other way.

He stayed crouched in the doorway. "Hiya, Bean."

She did not turn back.

For five days she treated him the way she might treat a visitor who had stayed too long: politely, from a distance, and with her face pressed into her mother's neck if he came near. Melissa told him to give it time. He gave it time. He was very good at waiting by then.

On Sunday evening Melissa sat down on the sofa with the baby, and then stopped and looked at him, and he understood.

He had written that week's letter on the Friday before his release, out of habit. It had never been posted. It was still in the pocket of his jacket, folded in four. He took it out and sat down on the other end of the sofa. He felt more nervous than he had in front of the judge.

The paper crackled as he unfolded it.

Bean's head came round.

"Dear Bean," said Darren.

She looked at the paper. She looked at him. Then she wriggled off her mother's lap, went across the sofa on her hands and knees like a determined little crab, and sat down hard against his leg, looking at the page, waiting. It was Sunday. Sunday was the letter.

He read the whole thing. It was about the last tea he would ever eat in there, and the one-footed pigeon, and how he would miss it, the pigeon, not the tea. His voice went in the middle and he had to start that line again. Bean did not seem to mind. When he reached the end, *Your dad*, she reached up, took hold of the corner of the page, and put it firmly in her mouth.

Melissa says he does not need to write any more. He lives in the same house. He can just tell her.

He still writes one every Sunday. They go in a shoebox on top of the wardrobe. The early ones have a corner missing.

Sit with this: When someone cannot be there, what small, regular thing could keep their place in a child's week?

22

Four Cries

Anthony was sixty-three when he became, as the paperwork put it, a kinship foster carer. In plainer words, he was a grandad bringing up a baby on his own.

His daughter was not well enough that winter to look after anyone, herself included, and everybody hoped it would not be for long. Spencer came to him from the hospital at nine days old, with a bag of clothes, a tin of formula and a folder of leaflets. Anthony read every leaflet, standing up in the kitchen, with his glasses on the end of his nose. Some of them he read twice.

He had not done this for thirty years, and when he had done it before, his wife had done most of it. She had died six years ago. He found himself talking to her a great deal in the first fortnight, mostly about nappies.

He also found himself watched. Not unkindly. But there was a social worker who came every other week and sat on his sofa with a file on her knee, and a health visitor, and a review in three months that would decide whether Spencer stayed. If it went well, the plan was to ask the court to make Anthony his special guardian, so that the baby could stay with him for as long as he was needed, without a file on the sofa. He knew they had to check. He knew it was for the baby. He kept the house cleaner than it had been since the funeral, and every time the doorbell went he looked round the room for anything that might suggest a man of sixty-three was not coping.

By seven weeks he knew Spencer's cries. He could not have explained it to anyone, and was not going to try. But there were four of them. There was hungry, which built. There was wet, which

complained. There was bored, which was mostly noise and stopped the moment you picked him up. And there was a thin, lost one in the evenings that Anthony privately thought of as wanting his mum, and which he could do nothing about except walk up and down the hall singing whatever came into his head.

At ten past two one morning in January, Spencer woke crying, and it was none of the four.

It was higher. Thinner. It did not build or complain. It just went on, on one note, and when Anthony picked him up it did not change at all. He felt hot. He would not take his bottle. And after a while, instead of settling, he went quiet in a way Anthony did not like. Drowsy. Floppy, almost, against his shoulder.

The thermometer said thirty-eight point four.

Anthony stood in the hall in his dressing gown. One of the leaflets had said something about fever in babies under three months. He knew it had. He could see the page in his mind, with the yellow box at the bottom.

He could also see the social worker's file. He could see a line in it: *Grandfather called an ambulance at 2 a.m.* He could see her reading it on his sofa, and looking at him over her glasses, and wondering whether a man his age, on his own, really knew what he was doing.

He very nearly put the phone back in its cradle. Afterwards, that was the bit he could not stop thinking about.

Then the yellow box came back to him, word for word. A baby under three months with a temperature of thirty-eight or more: get urgent advice from 111 or the GP the same day. A baby who is floppy, or hard to wake, or not feeding: do not wait. Ring 999.

He rang 999.

The woman on the other end asked him a list of questions, quickly and calmly, and then said that she was sending an ambulance. It came in eleven minutes. In the back of it, with Spencer on his chest and a paramedic watching the baby's breathing, Anthony realised he had come out in his slippers.

It was a kidney infection. A bad one, the doctor said, the kind that can spread fast in very small babies. They put a tiny line into the back

of Spencer's hand and ran antibiotics through it, and Anthony sat beside the cot on a plastic chair for five days and slept in it for four nights.

On the second morning the registrar, a young woman with her hair tied up in a pencil, came to see him.

"What made you ring?" she asked. She did not sound as though he had been wrong to. She sounded curious.

Anthony thought about it. "He's got four cries," he said. "That wasn't any of them."

She looked at him for a moment. Then she wrote something in the notes. He could not see what. He was afraid to ask.

"I nearly didn't ring," he said. "I thought they'd say I couldn't manage him."

The registrar clicked her pen and put it back in her hair. "A baby his age, with a temperature and floppy with it, is always a 999 call," she said. "Plenty of people talk themselves out of it at two in the morning. You didn't. You noticed something nobody else in the world would have noticed, and then you picked up the phone. That's managing him."

The social worker came the week after they got home. Anthony had hoovered twice before she rang the bell, and his stomach was in a knot. She had the discharge letter on her knee. She read it, and then, instead of asking about coping, she asked him how he had known.

So he told her about the four cries.

She wrote that down too.

The hospital bracelet is in the biscuit tin on the mantelpiece now, with the spare buttons. It is very small. It sits next to his own, from the heart operation, which is not.

Sit with this: What do you know about a child in your care that you could not easily explain to anyone else? What gets in the way, for you, of acting on it?

23

When Mothers Became the Warmth

A true story

In 1978 the Instituto Materno Infantil in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, was one of the busiest maternity hospitals anywhere. Thousands of babies were born there every year. The wards were crowded. There were not enough incubators to go round, and the ones there were often held more than one baby at a time. Infections spread easily. Premature babies, born too soon and too small to keep themselves warm, too often died. Too many others were left behind in the hospital when their mothers went home.

The head of paediatrics was a doctor named Edgar Rey Sanabria. He could not conjure up more machines. The hospital could not afford them. So he began to look for an answer that did not depend on equipment at all.

He found it in the mothers.

The idea was very simple. A premature baby, dressed in nothing but a nappy, was placed upright against the mother's bare chest, skin against skin, and held there by a wrap of cloth, with the head turned a little to one side so that the baby could breathe easily. The mother's own body kept the baby warm. The baby could feed whenever it needed to, because the breast was right there. And mothers and babies could go home together much sooner, with the baby carried in the same position, day and night, until it grew strong enough to wriggle and protest and refuse it.

When a mother needed to rest, the baby could be moved to another chest: the father's, or that of someone else close to the family. The warmth did not have to come from one person only.

It came to be called kangaroo mother care, after the animal that carries its young in a pouch.

What began as a necessity in one overcrowded hospital, a way of coping with not having enough, travelled. Doctors and nurses in

other countries heard about it, tried it, and studied it. Over the following decades it spread across the world.

In 2022 the World Health Organization advised that babies born early or small should be held skin to skin in this way from immediately after birth, rather than first being separated from their parents, with the monitoring and treatment they need given while they are held. A baby who needs emergency care gets it first, and the machines still matter. Kangaroo care works alongside skilled medical care, not instead of it.

Think of what that means. The newest guidance for the smallest, most fragile babies in the world turned out to be the oldest form of care there is. A baby held against a parent's chest, warm, close, fed, hearing a heartbeat it has known for months. No one invented it in 1978. It was rediscovered, by a hospital that had run out of machines and had the sense to look at what it still had.

The warmth was there all along. The babies knew where it was.

Sit with this: What do we reach for first when we are frightened for a child? What else might be within arm's reach, alongside it?

24

Six O'Clock Is Mine

The birth certificate had two boxes on it, and Bryony was not allowed in either of them.

She had been there for all of it. She had timed the contractions on her phone, held a cardboard bowl, and cut the cord when the midwife held out the scissors. Tommy had arrived purple and furious at twenty past five on a Wednesday morning, and the first face he looked at, as far as anyone could tell, was hers, because Tess had her eyes shut and was saying she was never doing that again.

But Tess and Bryony were not married. They had always meant to get round to it. And they had not gone to a clinic, because clinics cost money they did not have, so their old friend Desmond had

helped them, the way friends sometimes do, with a kit from the chemist and a great deal of nervous laughter.

In the eyes of the law, that made Desmond Tommy's father, though he had no wish to be and had said so in writing. And it made Bryony nobody at all.

"You'll have to adopt him," said the solicitor, above a dentist's. "Your own son. I know."

So she did what had to be done. She wrote to the council to say she meant to apply. A social worker, Mrs Seddon, came to the house four times with a laptop, sat on the sofa under the clothes horse, and asked about Bryony's childhood, her job at the DIY shop, her health, and her parents. Desmond wrote a letter. Tess wrote a letter. Bryony's mother, who was seventy-one and had needed a while to get used to the idea of two mothers, wrote one too, in her best handwriting, and would not let anyone read it.

On the last visit, Mrs Seddon closed the laptop and said there was one more thing. The judge would want to hear from Bryony in her own words. Not the facts. They had the facts.

"What does your bond with him rest on?" she said. "Write that down. However you like."

Bryony sat at the kitchen table that night with a pad and a biro for an hour and wrote nothing. Everything she started sounded like a greetings card. *Love. Commitment. Always there for him.* Anyone could say that about anyone.

At six the next morning Tommy woke, as he always did, and she went down in the dark to warm his bottle, because six o'clock was hers. Tess did the night feeds and Bryony did six. She sat on the third stair with him, the way she always did, and he put both hands round the bottle over hers and tipped it to the angle he liked, and watched her the whole time with one eyebrow pulled down, as if checking she was doing it properly.

She went back to the pad and wrote that down. Just that.

Then she wrote the bath song, which was not a real song but a thing about ducks she had made up in the first week and now could not get out of, and how he kicked at the second verse. She wrote that

he would only sleep in the car if she drove, because she went round the big roundabout twice. That he was frightened of the hand dryers in the supermarket toilets, and she covered his ears. Which vest was too short now, that she had kept anyway. That he said "dat" for the bottle, the duck and her.

By the end she had two sides of small things. None of it sounded like a statement. She was about to copy it out again properly when Tess read it over her shoulder and said, "Don't you dare."

The hearing was in a room smaller than she had expected, with a long table instead of a dock, and nobody in a wig. Tommy, ten months old, sat on Tess's knee and worked his way through a rice cake. The judge was a woman of about sixty with reading glasses on a cord. She said she had read everything, every letter. Then she picked up the two sides of paper.

"I should like to read one part aloud," she said, "if you don't mind."

Bryony's face went hot. She nodded.

"'Six o'clock is mine,'" the judge read. "'He holds the bottle with both hands over mine and tips it the way he likes it, and he watches me the whole time to make sure I'm doing it right.'" She took off her glasses. "I have read a great many statements," she said. "That is as clear a description of a parent as I have come across."

She made the order. It took about a minute.

Outside on the court steps it was drizzling. Bryony's mother had come in her good coat and her church hat, and she held out her arms for Tommy, and Tess passed him over. She settled him on her hip the way she had settled Bryony forty years before, and looked at him sternly.

"Now then," she said, loud enough for the people at the bus stop. "Go to your mum."

And she turned, and put him into Bryony's arms.

Sit with this: Who belongs to a child's thread without a box on any form to show it? If someone asked what your bond rests on, which small daily thing would you write down?

25

Week Eleven

Everyone had told Nia about the rush.

The midwives told her. Her sister told her. A woman at the antenatal class, who already had three, put a hand on Nia's arm over the biscuits and said, "The minute they put him on you, love. It knocks you flat."

When they put Jayden on her chest, something did start. Her heart began to go like a bird trapped in a box. It did not stop for weeks.

She checked his breathing. She checked it with her hand on his chest, then with her cheek near his mouth, then she could not sleep in case she missed the moment it stopped. She would not let Benny take him out in the car. She could not bath him, because pictures came into her head when she ran the water, quick and terrible, and they came without being asked and made her feel like a monster.

She did everything. She fed him and changed him and winded him and walked him. She did all of it with a stone in her stomach, and when she looked at his face she waited for love and felt only dread. Somewhere in the second week she decided, quietly, that the thing everyone talked about had not happened to her and was not going to. Some mothers had it. She had missed it.

She told nobody that part. She was sure that if she said it out loud, someone would take him away.

In week five, at four in the morning, Benny found her standing over the Moses basket in the dark with her hand flat on the baby's chest, shaking so hard her teeth knocked. He did not ask her anything. He put his dressing gown round her and sat her on the bed, and in the morning, while she was in the shower, he rang the health visitor.

Nia was furious with him for about a day.

The health visitor came that afternoon. She listened, and did not look shocked, and by the end of the week a nurse from the perinatal

mental health team was sitting at their kitchen table. Her name was Grace Okafor. She had a soft Lagos voice and drank her tea black.

"Nobody is taking him anywhere," was the first thing she said. Nia had not asked. Grace said it anyway, because, she said, everybody wanted to ask, and hardly anybody did.

She told Nia that what she had was called perinatal anxiety, and that it was common, and treatable. She told her that the pictures had a name too, intrusive thoughts, and that they came to frightened mothers who loved their babies, not to mothers who wished them harm. They were fear, not a wish. The more they horrified her, the clearer that was.

"And the feeling?" Nia said. "The one everyone gets?"

"Not everyone," said Grace. "Not straight away. It's hard to feel anything much when you are this frightened. Your job isn't to feel it. Your job is to get through today. We'll do the rest."

So that was what they did. Grace came every week. The doctor started her on a tablet that was safe to take while she was feeding him. There was a psychologist on Thursday mornings, where Nia talked and Jayden slept in his car seat. Benny took over the baths for now, and did not make a thing of it. Her sister came on Mondays so that Nia could sleep. Some days were better. Some were not. She got through them, one by one, and did not expect anything else.

In week eleven, at three o'clock in the morning, she was on the sofa with the lamp on and Jayden on her lap, finishing a feed. The house was very quiet.

Nia sneezed.

It was her father's sneeze, the family sneeze, the kind that rattles cups. It came out of nowhere, enormous, and Jayden jumped in her arms and stared up at her with his mouth open, utterly astonished.

Then he laughed.

It was the first time. A short, hiccuping gurgle, from somewhere down in his middle, and his whole face creased up with it, and his fists went up by his ears.

Nia stared at him. Then, because she could not help it, she said, "Ah… ah…" and pulled the sneezing face.

He watched her. He held his breath. His eyes went wide.

"Choo," she said, very softly.

He laughed again, louder, and kicked both legs. And something turned over in her, not a rush and not a flood, more like a door that had been stuck in its frame for weeks and gave all at once. She found she was laughing too, and crying, and that the bird in the box had gone quiet without her noticing when.

At twenty past three Benny came down in his socks to see what the noise was. He stopped in the doorway.

His wife was on the sofa in the lamplight with the baby held up in front of her face, and they were both holding their breath.

"Ah…" said Nia. "Ah…"

Jayden waited, trembling all over, for the rest.

Sit with this: If the feeling you were promised has not come yet, who could you tell? Who near you might be waiting, quietly, for someone to ask how they really are?

26

Sitting on Her Hands

Primrose was the eldest of five, and she had brought up the younger four, more or less, while their mum worked shifts at the biscuit factory. She could change a nappy one-handed while stirring a pan with the other. She could tell from the next room which brother was crying and why. She had three children of her own now, all at school, and she was very good at babies.

Noel was the youngest of the five. He was thirty. He had become a stay-at-home father when his daughter was four months old and his wife went back to her job on the ambulances, and Primrose, who lived two streets away, came round to help.

She came round every day.

It was a help. Noel said so, often. He also noticed that whenever the baby cried and Primrose was in the room, his sister said, "Give

her here," and he gave her there. Every time. He did not even think about it. Neither did she.

One morning, when the baby was five months old, Noel was trying to get her to burp, and Primrose said from the doorway, "You're holding her wrong."

She saw his face close.

It closed exactly the way it had when he was nine and she had undone his shoelaces in the playground and done them up again properly, in front of his friends. She had forgotten that face. She had not forgotten it at all.

She went home and could not settle. That night she lay awake beside her snoring husband and went over the last month, and realised that she could not remember the last time she had watched her brother do something with his own daughter all the way to the end.

In the morning she made herself a rule. She did not tell anyone. Whenever she wanted to take over, she would sit on her hands.

The first week was hard. The second was worse.

At six months, the health visitor gave Noel a leaflet about starting solid food, and Noel read about something called baby-led weaning: no purées, no spoons, just soft pieces of real food that the baby picks up and feeds herself. He had done a baby first-aid course at the library. He knew the difference between gagging and choking. He had made up his mind.

Primrose thought it was madness. Hers had all had jars, and look at them.

On the first morning she arrived with three jars of pear purée in her handbag, just in case. She sat down at the kitchen table. Noel strapped the baby into the high chair, steamed a single floret of broccoli, let it cool, and laid it on the tray.

The baby looked at the broccoli. She picked it up in her fist like a tiny tree. She examined it. She put the top in her mouth.

Then she gagged.

Her face went red. Her tongue pushed. Her eyes watered. It was loud and it looked terrible, and every part of Primrose's body that had raised four brothers and three children stood up inside her.

She put her hands under her thighs, flat on the wooden chair, and pressed down.

Noel did not move either. He was crouched by the high chair, watching the baby's face, very calm. "That's the gag," he said quietly, as much to Primrose as to anyone. "She's all right. That's what it's for. She's learning where the back of her mouth is."

The baby coughed, pushed the broccoli forward with her tongue, sat back, blinked at both of them, and went in again with her gums, more carefully this time. Green dribble ran down her chin. She looked enormously pleased with herself.

Primrose let out a breath she had been holding for about a minute and a half.

"Was I like that?" said Noel.

"You were worse," said Primrose. "You threw yours at the cat."

He laughed. The baby, hearing him, laughed as well, a great gummy laugh with broccoli in it.

Then she did something that neither of them had seen her do before. She took the soggy remains of her floret, studied it, and held it out at arm's length, wobbling, as if offering it to someone.

She held it out to Noel.

Not to her aunt, who had held her nearly every day of her life. To her father. He took it from her solemnly and pretended to eat it, and she shrieked with delight.

Primrose found, to her own surprise, that she did not mind at all.

Her hands were still under her thighs. Both of them had gone completely numb. She left them there a while longer, and the jars of pear stayed in her handbag, and she drank her tea when Noel put it in front of her, and she watched.

Sit with this: When you help someone new to caring for a child, how often do you watch them do it all the way to the end?

27

Plot Fourteen

Nancy had held plot fourteen on the allotments behind the cricket ground for four years, and when she found out she was pregnant, everybody told her to give it up.

Her mother told her. Mr Bevan, who chaired the allotment committee and had views on bindweed, told her. Her friends told her, kindly, over coffee. The baby's father lived in another city now and was not going to be part of things, and nobody needed to tell Nancy that she would be doing this on her own. She knew.

"You won't have time," said her mother. "You won't have the energy. You'll let it go to rack and ruin and then you'll feel bad. Give it up now, love."

Nancy listened to all of it. Then she said no.

She did not argue. She simply told them what was going to happen, the same way, every time anyone asked. "The baby's going to grow up on that plot."

That autumn, with her bump growing, she cut the plot in half. She laid cardboard and old carpet over the back half, so it would rest instead of running wild. On the front half she built three raised beds, at waist height, so she would not have to bend. She put up a canvas sail on poles at the end by the plum tree for shade. She cleared the old shed and put a camping chair in it and a flask on the shelf. Then she set herself a rule: two hours a day, mornings only, home by eleven. Not one minute more.

In the last weeks of the pregnancy she went most days anyway, slowly, and sat in the camping chair with the door open, and did a little, and went home.

Mr Bevan sent her a letter about the carpet. She sent him a reply, very polite, explaining her plan in three short paragraphs. He did not write again.

The baby, a boy, came in January. At six weeks, on the first dry morning of February, Nancy wrapped him up like a parcel, put him in the pram, and walked to the allotments. She parked the pram

under the bare plum tree, put the brake on, put a net over the hood, and started turning compost.

After that she went every morning. Nine o'clock. In the rain she went in waterproofs and stayed in the shed. On cold days she went for half an hour. Home by eleven. She did not explain herself any more. She just went, and anyone who wanted to know where she was knew exactly where to find her.

Her mother thought she was being stubborn. She said so, on the phone, several times. She did not come to the plot. She had never once been to the plot.

In May, Nancy came down with a fever and a temperature of thirty-nine, and could barely get out of bed. Her mother came round to help, which meant mostly sighing at the washing-up, and at a quarter to nine Nancy said from the sofa, "Mum. Will you take him?"

"Take him where?"

"The plot. Nine o'clock. He has his long sleep there. He won't go down properly anywhere else now."

Eileen said this was ridiculous. Then she put on her coat.

She was gone for two and a half hours.

When she came back, her shoes were muddy and her face had a look on it that Nancy had not seen there before. She sat down on the end of the sofa.

"That old man on plot nine," she said. "With the hat. He came over and said, 'He's late this morning.' He knows him. He knew his name. The woman with the bees brought me a cup of tea in a proper cup. A lad from the far end asked if you'd want his spare onion sets." She stopped. "They all know him. The whole place. They all know him."

"I did tell you," said Nancy, from under the blanket.

"You did," said Eileen. She looked at her muddy shoes. "I pulled up a few weeds while he was asleep. I hope that was all right."

Nancy's fever broke two days later. On the third morning, at a quarter to nine, there was a knock at the door. Her mother stood on

the step in an old anorak, holding a pair of gardening gloves, still with the price tag on.

"Well," said Eileen. "What are we doing today?"

So Nancy told her.

By June her mother had her own kneeling pad and her own opinions about slugs. She came three mornings a week. On those mornings, the baby slept in his pram under the plum tree, now in full leaf, and Eileen knelt on the path in Nancy's spare wellies with her sleeves rolled up, working steadily along the first raised bed.

"Not those, Mum," said Nancy, from the other end. "Those are the carrots."

Sit with this: What course have you set for a child's home, even if you have never said it aloud? Who might find their way to you, if you simply keep going?

❧

Things you might try

A few quiet minutes. If you are expecting a child, by birth or by any other road, try sitting quietly for a few minutes each day with your hand where the baby is, or, if your child is coming to you another way, with them in your mind. You do not need to think anything in particular. You are simply turning towards someone. If it feels foolish, do it anyway; Damian felt a fool kneeling by the bump, and Melissa felt silly reading that first letter aloud.

A song, a story, a habit. Choose one small thing that is yours to give, and give it regularly: a tune, a chapter of a book, a minute at the same time each evening. Let other people in the family choose theirs. A child's first circle is woven from many small, faithful strands, not from one big gesture.

Two kinds of care, from everyone. Notice which kind of care comes naturally to you, the warm and receiving kind or the steady and directing kind, and try offering a little of the other. The parent who is all warmth might set the family's course out loud. The one

who keeps the rules might learn the bath song. A grandparent might sit on their hands, and let someone else see it through to the end.

Trust what you notice, and ask. If something about a baby or child feels different to you, even if you cannot explain it, take it seriously enough to ask for help, as Anthony did at two in the morning. A quiet feeling is not a nuisance. It is often love doing its job. The same is true of you: if the days are full of dread, tell someone, as Benny did for Nia. Asking for help is part of caring for the baby.

Your story

Somewhere in your own life there is a thread like the ones in this chapter. Perhaps it was a count given at midnight, a neighbour on the landing, a silly song made up in the bath. Perhaps you were the one keeping a finger still, or the small fist holding on at the other end.

Take a quiet minute with it. Who kept a hand where you could reach it? And whose hand, these days, is reaching for yours?



Take your time.

PART TWO

The Garden Years

Birth to seven

In the first seven years a child is more like a garden than a pupil. Nothing in a garden is hurried into bloom; it is given soil, light, water and time, and the gardener's whole art is in noticing what each plant needs. These years are lived through the body and the senses, through rhythm and repetition, through the faces and voices close by. A small child learns far more from who we are than from anything we try to teach. The three chapters that follow are about joy before lessons, about days with a shape a child can trust, and about the first classroom of all, which has a sky for a ceiling and a grown-up's example for a textbook.

CHAPTER 4

Nothing to Fear

Before a child learns anything at all, they learn whether it is safe to be themselves.

A little girl of about two and a half was standing on the landing with a red crayon in her fist.

The landing had been painted the weekend before, two coats of pale cream. Now, at about the height of a small girl's shoulder, there was a large red circle on it, with two long wobbly lines coming down from it and a fierce scribble on top.

Her dad came up the stairs with a basket of washing and stopped on the top step.

She did not look at the wall. She looked at him.

It lasted perhaps a second. She had gone completely still, reading his face the way a sailor reads the sky. In that second she was not learning anything about walls or crayons. She was learning what sort of world she lived in. Was a mistake the kind of thing that brought a shout, or the kind of thing that could be put right?

He had been up twice in the night with her baby brother, and he had every reason in the world to be tired. He put the basket down. He looked at the wall, and at the crayon, and at her.

"Who's that?" he said.

"Daddy," she said, and pointed at the scribble. "That's your hair."

He studied his hair. Then he crouched down beside her. "Walls aren't for drawing on, love. Paper's for drawing on. Shall we get it off?"

So they got it off, mostly, with warm soapy water and the kitchen sponge, she with great seriousness and very little effect, he finishing the job afterwards. Then he flattened a cardboard box from the

recycling, taped it low on the back of the kitchen door, and gave her the crayon back. She drew him again. This time he had ears.

We need to know nothing else about that family to know what that girl found out on an ordinary Saturday morning at the top of the stairs. She found out that she could get something wrong and still be safe. Nobody taught her that in words. It was written on her father's face, and she read it there.

This chapter begins the second part of the book: the years from birth to about seven. These are the years of laps and kitchen floors and nursery carpets, of wellies by the door and the same story read eleven times. Before a child can read a word, they are reading faces. They know whether a room is safe long before they know what it is called. Whatever else we teach them in these years, we are first teaching them whether it is safe to be who they are.

Most of us were brought up, at least partly, on fear. Not cruelty, usually. Just the ordinary tools: the threat that works for a moment, the comparison with the cousin who never makes a fuss, the hurry that turns every morning into a race. We reach for them when we are tired, because they were reached for with us. They do not make anyone a bad parent or a bad teacher. But they can teach a small child something we never meant to say: that their place in our love depends on how they behave.

So the first thing a frightened child needs is not a lesson, or a sticker chart, or a technique. It is you, close by, and not frightened of their fear. Get down to their height. Say what you think they are feeling. Stay. The teaching can come afterwards, and it goes in far more easily once a child knows they are safe.

If you are caring for a young child, you are almost certainly tired. There will be days when you snap at a small person whose only crime was being small, and lie awake afterwards wishing you had done it differently. This chapter is not here to add to that weight. When you get it wrong, go back and mend it. A child who hears a grown-up say sorry learns that love survives mistakes, including their own.

None of the grown-ups in this chapter has a method. Mostly, they notice something, and then they wait. Several get it wrong first, and more than one needs somebody else's help before things come right. That is how it usually goes.

28

A Helmet for the Shops

Megan worked four days a week on the front desk at the building society, which left Saturday mornings for everything else: the launderette, the chemist, the market, the bank machine, and Ted.

Ted was three. On this particular Saturday he came into the hall, where Megan was hunting for the second glove, wearing the colander.

It was the big metal one with two handles, and it came down over his ears and stopped just short of his eyebrows. He had his wellies on the wrong feet and his dinosaur coat zipped up to his chin. He looked like a very small soldier from a war fought entirely in kitchens.

"Right," said Megan. "Lovely. Off it comes. We're going to the shops."

"It's my helmet," said Ted.

"It's the colander."

"It's my helmet for the shops."

Megan opened her mouth to say what she always said, which was *not today*. She was already late. The colander would fall off on the bus. Mrs Petrie from the flat downstairs would be at the bus stop, and Mrs Petrie had views on children. In her head Megan could already hear somebody saying, *Is that your pasta strainer, love?*, and somebody else laughing.

Then she noticed Ted was not arguing any more. He had gone quite still under the colander, and he was looking at her face. Not at the door, not at his wellies. At her. Waiting to see which kind of morning this was going to be.

Megan looked at him for a moment. Then she said, "Does it need a strap?"

Ted's face opened like a window.

They used one of her old hair bobbles and a length of ribbon from the present drawer, threaded through both handles and tied in a bow under his chin. Megan put his wellies on the right feet while she was down there. He checked the strap three times in the mirror by the door, then marched out onto the landing with his chin up, making a small clanking noise on every step.

Mrs Petrie was at the bus stop. She looked at Ted from the colander down to the wellies and back again.

"What's that in aid of?" she said.

Ted explained, kindly, as if to someone who had not been told. "It's for the shops. The holes are so my thinks can get out."

Mrs Petrie considered this. Then, to Megan's astonishment, she said, "Very sensible. Mine get stuck all the time," and offered him a mint.

On the bus the driver said, "Morning, captain," and Ted saluted with the wrong hand. At the market the man on the fruit stall made a great show of checking that the colander was not one of his, and then gave Ted a satsuma to keep in it, which did not work, because Ted wanted the colander back on his head straight away, so Ted carried the satsuma and the colander carried Ted's thinks. In the launderette a teenage girl folding towels took a photograph and asked first. At the chemist the pharmacist came out from behind the counter, crouched down, and asked Ted whether he had come about his helmet or about Mummy's prescription. Ted said both.

It slipped down over his eyes twice. Once he walked into a display of hot-water bottles and knocked three onto the floor. He picked them up himself, because that was the rule about knocking things over, and put them back upside down, and nobody minded.

Megan found that she had stopped looking round to see who was looking. Somewhere between the bus and the market she had started to enjoy it. People kept smiling at her. Not the tight smile you get when your child is lying on the floor of a shop, but the other kind, as

if she and Ted had brought something nice into the morning and they were glad of it.

On the way back from the bus stop it began to rain.

Megan put her hood up. Ted did not have to. He stopped in the middle of the pavement, very still, and looked up into the grey sky, and the rain came down onto the colander and through the holes in fine silver threads, all round his face, like a little private shower.

"Mummy," he said, in a voice of pure wonder. "It's raining *inside*."

So they walked home slowly, the long way, past the park, because he wanted to see how much of it he could get through the holes. By the time they reached the flats his fringe was soaked and his face was shining and he was laughing so much he could hardly climb the stairs.

That evening Megan made pasta for tea, and drained it in the sink. Ted watched from the doorway with his arms folded, very grave.

"That's my helmet," he said.

On Monday, on her lunch break, she went to the pound shop and bought a second colander. It lives on the hook by the front door now, between her coat and his, with a hair bobble and a length of ribbon threaded through the handles, ready for Saturday.

Sit with this: When the small child near you does something gloriously odd, what do they find on your face?

29

The Key on a String

Oscar was five when he and his mum moved into Craig's house.

It was a good house. Everyone said so. It had a garden and a proper upstairs and a bedroom that Craig had painted green, because Oscar's mum had said green was his favourite. But Oscar was frightened of all of it. The stairs creaked in places he did not know yet. The boiler made a noise at night like someone coughing. And there was Craig himself, who was very tall and had a beard and a deep voice, and who laughed in a way that filled the whole kitchen.

Oscar would not stay in a room unless his mum was in it. When Craig spoke to him, he went behind her legs.

"Give him time," his mum said, on the landing, in a low voice.

"I know," said Craig. "I'm not going anywhere."

Craig had an allotment at the edge of town, between the railway line and the canal. He went every Saturday morning. For the first few weeks Oscar would not go, so his mum stayed home with him, and Craig went alone. Then one Saturday she said they were all going, and that was that, and Oscar walked the whole way there holding her hand so hard that her fingers went white.

At the gate, Craig stopped and patted all his pockets. Then he patted them again.

"Lost the key," he said, sounding genuinely fed up. "Every week. Every single week I lose this key." He found it, in the end, in his back pocket, where it always was. He looked at it in his big hand. Then he crouched down, slowly, so that he was a bit lower than Oscar.

"I need someone in charge of this," he said. "Someone who won't lose it. I'm hopeless. Do you know anyone?"

Oscar looked at his mum. Then he looked at the key. It was small and brass and dull, with a bit of red tape round the top.

Craig took the lace out of one of his spare boots, slid the key onto it and tied a knot. He held it out. Oscar looked at it a while longer, then took it and put it over his head.

Opening the padlock was hard. The key had to go in a particular way, and then it had to be wiggled, and Oscar's tongue came out of the side of his mouth while he did it. Craig stood back and waited, as though there were no other way in. When the padlock clicked open, Oscar looked up at him, startled.

"That's it," said Craig. "Thank goodness for that. We'd have been stuck out here all day."

There were other jobs after that. Real ones. The water butt had a tap at the bottom that was just the right height for someone small, and the little green watering can was just the right size. The runner beans needed someone to find the red flowers, because Craig said his

back could not bend down that far, which was true. A robin sat on the fork handle whenever anybody dug, and somebody had to keep an eye on it.

Mr Hollins on the next plot leaned on his spade and said, "Who's this, then?"

Oscar held up the bootlace. "I've got the key," he said.

At home, Craig gave the key its own jam jar on the bottom shelf by the back door, and that was where it lived during the week. Oscar checked it every night before bed. His mum noticed that he went past Craig to do it, through the kitchen, without holding on to anyone.

It did not all change at once. But one Saturday in November it was pouring with rain, and Craig stood at the window with his tea and said maybe they would give the allotment a miss today.

Ten minutes later Oscar was in the hall, in his wellies and his raincoat with the hood already up, holding the key out on its lace.

"The beans," he said.

"The beans are finished, mate. It's November."

Oscar thought about this. "The robin, then."

So they went, the two of them, in the rain. Oscar's mum watched them go down the path from the front window: the tall man in the green coat, and the small one beside him, with something swinging round his neck.

At the gate Mr Hollins was sheltering in his shed doorway. He watched Oscar wiggle the key and click the padlock open, and then he nodded at Craig. "Your lad, is he?"

Craig opened his mouth and did not quite know what to say.

Oscar held up the bootlace. "I've got the key," he said, as though that settled it.

Sit with this: When a child is new and wary, what keeps them at the edge of things? Is there something real you could hand them?

30

The Cards in the Drawer

Betty was five, and in the summer term of Reception she was not reading.

Her mum, Brenda, found this out on a Thursday, from the little green reading record that came home in the book bag. Underneath a drawing of a cat with eleven legs, Betty's teacher had written, in kind, round handwriting: *Betty is a lovely, chatty girl. She needs lots of practice with her sounds at home. Little and often.*

Brenda read it twice in the school car park, then drove to the supermarket and bought a pack of flashcards, a hundred and twenty common words on shiny card, with a rubber band round them.

She meant well. So every night, after the bath and the teeth and before the story, there were ten cards. *The. And. Was. Said. Come.* Betty sat up in bed in her rabbit pyjamas, and Brenda held them up one at a time.

At first Betty liked it, because it was a game and her mum was paying attention. Then she stopped liking it. She started guessing. She would glance at the card for half a second, then look at Brenda's face, and say whatever word she thought might make it light up. *Was* became *saw*. *Come* became *cake*. When she got one wrong, Brenda said, "Nearly. Look again," in a bright voice, and Betty looked again, and got it wrong in a different way.

Brenda knew that look. She had worn it herself, at the back of a classroom thirty years before, counting the paragraphs ahead to see which one would be hers to read aloud.

She did not stop. The other mums at the gate talked about their children going up a book band. The boy next door was already reading the street signs out loud. And there was a part of Brenda, the tired part, that was frightened in a way she had no words for, and the cards were something to do with the fright.

By June the ten cards took twenty minutes. Betty sucked the cuff of her pyjamas. Some nights she cried, and then it was too late for a

story at all, and Brenda switched off the lamp feeling as though she had failed an exam of her own.

Then one night Brenda came up the stairs with the rubber band round her wrist and the dragon book under her arm. The dragon book was Betty's favourite. It was about a dragon who ran a café and kept setting fire to the toast, and Betty had loved it since she was three. She knew every page.

Betty was lying with the duvet over her head.

"Come on, sleepy," said Brenda. "Cards, then dragon."

From under the duvet a small voice said, "Can we not have a story tonight?"

Brenda stood very still on the landing carpet.

"Not even the dragon?"

"I'm too tired for reading."

Brenda sat down on the edge of the bed. She looked at the cards in her hand, bent now at the corners. Then at the lump under the duvet: her daughter, who had climbed into her lap with a book nearly every night of her life, and who had learned in four months that a book was something you could get wrong.

She put the cards in her dressing-gown pocket.

"No cards," she said. "Not tonight. I'll just read. You don't have to do anything."

The duvet did not move. So Brenda opened the dragon book and began. When she got to the burnt toast she did the fire noise herself, badly. After a moment a hand came out from under the duvet and turned the page, because she had been too slow.

The next morning she put the cards in the kitchen drawer, under the tea towels, and left them there.

She did not stop worrying completely. But at bedtime there was only the story, and sometimes two, and sometimes the same one three times. She did the voices. She ran her finger under the words because she liked to, and never once asked Betty to say one. The sounds came back as a game instead: I-spy in the car, *b-b-bus* and *c-c-cow*, with Betty choosing the letters and nobody keeping score. When

Betty asked, "What does that say?" about a sign on the bus, Brenda told her, and that was all.

In September Betty went into Year 1. The reading record still said *little and often*. Brenda read it, and closed it, and put it back in the book bag.

At the first parents' evening she asked the teacher straight out whether Betty was all right. The teacher said Betty was still slow with her sounds, and that she was keeping a close eye. If it was still hard by the spring, they would have her properly assessed, and they would check her hearing and her eyes too, because sometimes it was as simple as that. "But keep reading to her," she said. "That part you're already doing."

One Saturday in October, Betty was having breakfast in her pyjamas with the cereal box propped against the milk in front of her. She was not looking at her mum. She was looking at the box, at the big yellow star in the corner, and her lips were moving.

"F," she said under her breath. "Fr. Free." She looked up. "It says free. Free what?"

Brenda had her back against the worktop. She had to hold on to it for a moment.

"A sticker," she said, when she could. "Inside, at the bottom."

Betty tipped the box up to look, and cornflakes went everywhere, across the table and all over the floor. Neither of them minded at all.

Brenda fetched the dustpan. And Betty, on her knees under the table among the cornflakes, with the empty box in her hands, was reading the star again, very quietly, to no one in particular.

Sit with this: Is there something a child once loved that has quietly turned into a test? What is the worry underneath it, and who could help you carry that?

31

What the Notebook Said

Diana was a childminder. She lived in a flat above a chip shop in a busy part of the city, and every weekday she looked after four children there, from nine months to four years old. By late afternoon the flat smelled faintly of chips from downstairs.

Bobby was three. He had been coming to her since he was a baby. He was quick and loud and very strong for his size, and he had a habit, that autumn, of biting when things did not go his way.

Each child had a little notebook that went home with them in their bag, and every afternoon Diana wrote in it what had happened that day. Diana was conscientious about the notebooks, and she was honest in them, because she thought parents ought to know.

So Bobby's notebook said things like: *Bobby bit one of the twins at snack time. We talked about gentle mouths.* And: *Bobby refused his nap and woke the baby.*

Every afternoon his mum, who worked long shifts at a call centre and arrived with her lanyard still round her neck, read the notebook on the doorstep. She read it aloud, the way you do with a small child, and at the end she sighed, and said, "Oh, Bobby." She was not unkind about it. She was tired, and a bit embarrassed, and she said sorry to Diana a lot.

One Tuesday in November, Bobby came to Diana while she was wiping the table. He had his notebook in his hand. He held it out to her.

"Write Bobby naughty," he said.

Diana stopped wiping. "What's that, love?"

"Write Bobby naughty," he said again, quite cheerfully, as though he were helping. "For Mummy."

He had not done anything. He had been playing with the garage for half an hour, perfectly happily.

That evening, after they had all gone home, Diana sat at her kitchen table and read back through Bobby's notebook. Three weeks of it. Every word was true. She had not exaggerated anything. But

she read it again, the way his mum read it, out loud, and she heard what Bobby had been hearing on the doorstep every afternoon. Bit. Refused. Threw. Woke. Every single entry was about something going wrong.

She thought about the things she had not written, because they had not seemed worth writing. That he always shared his raisins with the baby, one at a time, putting them carefully into her hand. That he had learned to do the zip on his coat. That when the twins were crying for their mum, he had brought them his own blanket.

None of it was in the book. She had written down what she thought his mother needed to know. She had never asked herself what Bobby needed to hear.

The next afternoon, she started at the top of the page with something he had tried. *Today Bobby carried the jug of water all the way from the kitchen to the table, with two hands. Then he spilt a bit, and went and fetched the cloth himself without being asked.* The biting, when there was biting, still went in. But it went further down, and shorter.

On the doorstep, his mum read it out. Diana watched Bobby. He had gone completely still on the step, holding on to the railing, listening to his own name in a sentence he had never heard it in before.

"Again," he said.

His mum looked at Diana, a bit puzzled. Then she read it again. "Did you carry the jug, Bobby? All by yourself?" And Bobby nodded so hard his hat fell off.

At the door, while he was looking for his hat, Diana said quietly, "I'd been writing the wrong half. I'm sorry. He's a good lad."

His mum looked down at the page. Then she said, "Thanks," and looked at the notebook as though she might read it a third time on the bus.

After that, Bobby began bringing things to Diana. He brought her a tower of bricks taller than himself. He brought her his shoes, on the wrong feet, and said, "Write I did my shoes." He brought her, once, a slug from the window box, which he felt was an achievement.

The biting did not stop overnight. But it became rarer, and then rare.

One wet afternoon in December, Diana came out of the kitchen and found Bobby on the sofa with his toy rabbit propped up beside him and his notebook open on his knees, upside down. He could not read yet. He was reading anyway, running his finger along the lines.

"Bobby carry the jug," he told the rabbit. "Bobby do the shoes. Bobby find a slug." He turned the page. "Bobby very good at the jug."

Sit with this: If a child could read everything we notice about them, what would it say?

32

Quiet Till the Bridge

Sheila drove the school minibus. Every morning she collected eleven children from the farms and hamlets up the valley and brought them down to the village school, forty minutes there and forty minutes back, along lanes so narrow that the hedges brushed both sides of the bus.

She had done it for nine years, and she kept a tin of travel sweets in the glove box for emergencies.

Zachary joined in September. He was six, and his family had moved into the old mill cottage at the top of the valley that summer. On his first morning he climbed on, sat down by the window, and did his seatbelt up very carefully. Then Sheila started the engine, and the radio came on with the engine as it always did, and the older children started shouting their usual morning shouts across the aisle.

Zachary put his hands over his ears and screamed.

It went on all the way down the valley, and the next morning, and the morning after that. Some mornings he kicked the back of the seat in front, over and over, until the child sitting in it cried. The older ones began to complain. A parent rang the school. Sheila tried everything she could think of. She moved him to the front. She

turned the radio down. The school sent some ear defenders, big padded ones, and he threw them on the floor. The school had asked for someone to come and assess him, but that would take months, and the bus came every morning.

One wet Monday in October, at the lay-by below the mill, Zachary would not get on at all. He stood on the verge in his raincoat with his hands already over his ears, and his mum stood beside him looking as though she had not slept.

Sheila turned the engine off. She got out, and came round, and sat down on the step of the bus in the drizzle, so that she was lower than he was.

"Zachary," she said, "what would make it better? On the bus. If you could choose."

He looked at her without answering. The rain dripped off the hedge.

"Quiet," he said.

"All the way?" Sheila asked. Forty minutes of silence with eleven children seemed a lot to promise.

He thought about it. "Till the bridge," he said.

"Why the bridge?"

"Because you can hear it," said Zachary. "If it's quiet. It goes different."

Sheila did not know what he meant. But she said, "All right." She stood up, and he got on, and before she started the engine she turned round in her seat and told the whole bus that from now on it was quiet till the bridge. No radio. No shouting. No talking at all. After the bridge, they could do what they liked.

There was a great deal of groaning. A big lad from Hollow Farm, who was ten and slept most of the way anyway, said it was stupid. But they tried it, because Sheila had the sweet tin.

The bus was very quiet. You could hear the wipers, and the rain on the roof, and the hedges brushing the windows. Someone's stomach rumbled and they all tried not to laugh. Zachary sat with his hands in his lap, looking out of the window, waiting.

Then they came down the hill to the river, and onto the old iron bridge.

And the sound changed. The low hum of the tyres on the tarmac went suddenly hollow, a deep rolling drum under the floor, as though they were driving across the top of something enormous and empty. It lasted perhaps five seconds. Then they were over, and it was gone.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then a girl in Year 5 said, "Oh."

Zachary said, "Now," and the bus erupted.

It became the rule. Within a fortnight the children were enforcing it themselves, more strictly than Sheila ever would have done. Anyone who talked before the bridge got looked at by eleven people. And in the quiet they started to notice things. The rattle of the cattle grid at the bottom of Hollow Lane. The old white horse that stood at the same gate every morning. A buzzard on a fence post.

Zachary still found the afternoons hard, and some days he still had his hands over his ears. But the screaming stopped.

The big lad from Hollow Farm admitted to Sheila, in the spring, that quiet till the bridge was the best bit of his day. His house was very loud, he said. Sheila said she knew what he meant. She had come to rely on it too.

On the last morning of the summer term, the bus came down the hill with all its windows open and eleven children leaning forward in their seats, not one of them making a sound. The river was low and brown. The white horse was at its gate.

Sheila changed down a gear, and then another, and took the old bridge as slowly as she had ever taken it, so that it would last.

Sit with this: When a child's struggle unsettles everyone around them, what have we asked them about it?

33

The Pencil Marks

Anna was six, and since the spring she had lived in two places.

One week she was with her mum, Edith, in the house in town where she had always lived. The next week she was with her dad, Bruce, in his new flat in the city, on the eleventh floor, with white walls and a view of the cranes. On Sunday evenings she went from one to the other in her dad's car, with her rucksack on her knee.

Her parents did not talk much any more. When they did, it was by text, short and polite, about pick-up times and swimming kit and whose turn it was for the dentist.

Anna managed. That was what everyone said about her. She did not cry at handovers or cling to anyone. But she had begun to do something her dad noticed and did not understand. Every Sunday, when she left his flat, she packed everything. Her pyjamas, her toothbrush, her drawings, the toy dog she slept with. She left nothing behind. So for the week she was away, the flat looked as though she had never been in it. And when she came back she took it all out again, carefully, as if she were a guest.

Then one evening in September, Bruce got out a pencil and a tape measure.

"Let's see how tall you are," he said. "Stand against the door."

Anna did not move.

"Come on," he said. "I bet you've grown."

"No," she said. "My height lives at Mummy's."

She said it quite firmly, as though explaining a rule he ought to know. Bruce put the pencil down.

He knew what she meant. In the old house, on the frame of the kitchen door, there was a column of pencil lines going back to her first birthday, each one with the date beside it in Edith's small, neat handwriting. Anna had been measured against that door every few months of her life. He had been there for most of them.

He sat up late that night looking at his phone. Then he sent Edith a text that was not about pick-up times.

She won't let me measure her. Says her height lives at yours.

Edith read it on the bus to work the next morning. She did not reply.

That evening, after Anna was asleep, Edith got out a roll of lining paper from under the stairs and a pencil and some masking tape. She taped a long strip of paper to the frame of the kitchen door. And then, very carefully, kneeling on the lino with the kitchen light on, she copied every mark onto it. Every line. Every date. *First birthday. Two and a bit. Before Cornwall. Just turned four.* It took her more than an hour, because she kept stopping.

The following Sunday, Anna's rucksack had a cardboard tube sticking out of the top. Inside was the strip of paper, rolled up, with a note in Edith's handwriting.

For Dad's door. E.

Bruce unrolled it on the floor of the flat, and Anna knelt beside him and studied it. She touched the bottom line with one finger.

"That's when I was one," she said.

"It is."

"That's Mummy's writing."

"It is."

They fixed it to his kitchen door frame together. The bottom had to touch the floor exactly, Anna said, or the marks would be wrong.

Then she stood against it, with her heels flat to the skirting board and her chin up, and let him lay a hardback from the shelf flat on her head.

"Don't cheat," she said.

He drew the line. It was a good centimetre above the last of Edith's. And beside it, in his own handwriting, which was larger and more slanting, he wrote the date.

The next Sunday, when she went back to her mum's, she made Edith measure her too, against the old door, and then she made her copy Dad's line onto the frame, with Dad's date, exactly where it belonged. Edith did it, and found that her hand was not quite steady.

After that, whenever Anna was measured in one house, the line went onto the other door the following week. Each parent copied

the other's writing as closely as they could, though neither of them was very good at it.

Bruce noticed the first time that Anna left her toothbrush in his bathroom when she went. Then her toy dog, on the pillow. Then, one Sunday, nearly everything.

And on two kitchen doors, in two different places, there climbed the same column of pencil lines in two handwritings, one small and neat, one large and slanting, and a girl standing at the bottom of whichever one it was that week, heels flat against the wall, telling whoever held the pencil not to cheat.

> *Sit with this:* When a child lives between two homes, what might they be afraid of losing on the way? What could each side send across to the other?

34

The Bread Bin Hour

When Isaac was born, Theo had just been made redundant, and Deborah had the better job, at the hospital pharmacy. So when her leave ended, it seemed obvious. Theo would stay at home with the baby, at least for a year. They told each other it was a sensible plan, and it was.

Theo was good at the doing of it. He was better at nappies than Deborah, and he could get Isaac's sleepsuit on with one hand while warming a bottle with the other.

He was also lonelier than he had expected. Everyone he knew was at work, and the only grown-ups he spoke to between eight and six were inside his phone. So, without quite deciding to, he spent most of the day on it.

It started with job sites, which seemed responsible. Then the news. Then the group chat from his old work. Then anything at all. He pushed the pram round the park with his earbuds in. He fed Isaac with his phone propped against the fruit bowl. When Isaac was

on his play mat, Theo sat on the sofa above him, scrolling, and looked down every so often to check he was still breathing.

By seven months, Isaac had become what the health visitor called an unsettled baby. Every afternoon, from about three, he grizzled. He would not sleep. He cried when he was put down and cried, a little less, when he was picked up. Theo walked him up and down the hall, reading the news over the top of his head.

"Some babies are just like that in the afternoons," the health visitor said, and wrote down the times of the baby group at the library. Theo believed her, and did not go to the group.

Then, on a Thursday in January, at about half past three, the electricity went off along the whole street.

It was nearly dark already. The fridge shuddered and stopped. The television went black. The router's little lights went out. Theo looked at his phone and saw that it was on four per cent, and while he was looking at it, it died.

He found the camping lantern in the cupboard under the stairs, and turned it on, and set it on the floor of the front room. Then, because there was truly nothing else to do, he lay down on the rug next to Isaac.

Isaac was on his back on his play mat. He turned his head and looked at his father in the lantern light, lying there at his level, a few inches away. He looked and looked. Then he reached up, grabbed both his own feet, one in each hand, and rocked from side to side, very pleased with himself.

Theo had not known he could do that.

He lay there and watched. Isaac let go of his feet and found Theo's ear instead, and pulled it, hard. He made a sound Theo had never heard, a sort of "gah-dah", and then he made it again and looked at Theo, waiting.

"Gah-dah," said Theo.

Isaac kicked his legs with delight and said it back.

They talked like that until Theo lost track of the time. At one point Isaac grew tired and rubbed his eye with his fist, and pulled at his own ear, and Theo wondered whether this was what Isaac did

every afternoon when he was tired, and whether he had been looking at something else when he did it. He picked him up, and Isaac went to sleep on his chest, there on the rug, without crying at all, that afternoon at least.

The lights came back at six. The fridge shuddered into life. The router blinked. Theo's phone, plugged into the wall, began to buzz and buzz with everything he had missed.

He let it buzz.

After that, he put his phone in the bread bin from three until four every afternoon. It was not a rule exactly. It was just that the bread bin had a lid, and the phone could not see out. Some days he cheated, and took it out at twenty past three to check one thing, and was still checking things at half past four.

It was not a cure. Isaac still had afternoons when he grizzled until bathtime whatever anybody did, and the health visitor was right: some babies are like that for a while, and he was one of them for some months yet. But Theo noticed sooner now when Isaac was tired, and the hard afternoons felt shorter to both of them.

And he stopped doing all of it on his own. Deborah's mum began coming on Wednesdays, walking Isaac up and down the hall while Theo did his job applications properly. On Fridays he went to the baby group at the library after all, and found two other dads there who were lonelier than they had expected.

In March, Deborah came home early from a shift. She let herself in quietly, in case Isaac was asleep. In the kitchen she could hear a buzzing noise. She traced it to the bread bin, lifted the lid, and found her husband's phone lying among the crusts, lit up with messages.

From the front room came voices. Two of them. One was Theo's, and one was Isaac's, and they appeared to be having a long and serious conversation in a language that neither she nor anyone else had ever heard.

She put the lid back on.

Sit with this: What pulls you away when you are with a small child, and what might help you set it down for an hour?

35

The Nursery on Lóczy Street

A true story

After the Second World War, the city of Budapest was full of children who had lost their families, or who had been left with no one at all.

Among those who had no one were babies, too young to understand what had happened to them, too young even to ask.

Institutions for babies in those years were often places where infants were fed and washed quickly, by staff with far too many children to care for. The work was done, but it was done in a hurry, and very often the children did not thrive. They were kept alive, but something that every small person needs was missing.

In 1946, a children's doctor named Emmi Pikler set up a residential home in the city for abandoned and orphaned infants. It was in a house on Lóczy Lajos Street, and in time the home came to be known simply by the name of the street: Lóczy.

What Pikler did there sounds, at first, very ordinary. She did not invent a machine or a medicine. She changed the way the babies were handled.

She chose the carers for her home with great care, and she trained them with great care too. She arranged things so that each baby had people they could come to know: familiar faces and familiar hands, the same few adults again and again, instead of a stream of strangers.

And she asked those carers to think differently about the most ordinary parts of the day. Feeding. Changing. Bathing. Dressing. In most busy institutions these were the chores, the jobs to be got through as fast as possible so that the next child could be done. At Lóczy, these moments were treated as the heart of the relationship between a baby and the person caring for them.

So the carers moved slowly. Before they did something to a baby, they told the baby what they were about to do. They waited. Those who carry Pikler's work on today describe the infant being treated as

"an active partner", and the care as something done with the child, rather than to them.

Think what that meant. A baby who cannot yet speak, cannot yet sit, has no family to visit, is told what is about to happen to their own body, and then given a moment to take part in it. An arm offered into a sleeve, rather than pushed. A pause before the warm water.

There was a second thing. The babies at Lóczy were not propped up in sitting positions before they could sit by themselves, and they were not hurried towards walking. They were given safe room to move, and time, and they were left free to move, explore and play in their own way.

None of it was grand. What it asked of the carers was patience, and a willingness to believe that even the smallest child is a person.

By the accounts of those who studied them, the children of Lóczy grew up developing well, in body and in mind. From 1960 onwards the institute published its findings, and its way of caring for the very young went on to influence nurseries, parents and carers far beyond Hungary. Pikler's approach is practised and taught in many countries today.

These were babies who had lost the families who should have received them. The world had already let them down before they could hold up their own heads. And yet, in a house on Lóczy Lajos Street, in the ordinary minutes of the day, a bath given slowly, with words and with waiting, told each of them something that no lesson could ever teach.

You are a person. We are doing this together.

The carers at Lóczy had many babies and not much time. They chose, anyway, to give each bath slowly. Out of that slowness, children who seemed to belong to no one learned that they belonged.

> *Sit with this:* Which ordinary moments of a child's day are you most tempted to hurry through? What might a child learn about themselves if one of them were done slowly?

36

When You Say Now

Winifred, whom everyone called Winnie, was five when she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. She had been thirsty for a month and tired for longer, and then one Sunday in the autumn she was so ill that her dad drove her to the hospital in the city in his work clothes, with straw still on his boots.

After five days on the children's ward she came home to the farm with a zipped bag full of things: insulin pens and a box of tiny needles, a little meter, lancets and test strips, glucose tablets and a carton of juice for if she went low, and a notebook for writing numbers in. Soon, the nurse said, she would have a sensor on her arm that read her sugar day and night, and far fewer finger pricks. But the sensor would take a few weeks. Until then, several times a day, someone had to prick her finger to test her blood, and then give her insulin.

Her mum drove for a delivery firm and was away three nights a week, so much of it fell to her dad, a dairy farmer with big, cracked, careful hands, who had never in his life been so frightened of anything as he was of that zipped bag.

Quick is kinder, the nurses on the ward had told him. So he did it quickly. He held Winnie on his knee with one arm round her, and took her hand, and did it, while she screamed and twisted and tried to pull away.

It did not get easier. Within a fortnight Winnie screamed when she saw the bag. Then she began to run, out of the back door and across the yard and hid in the calf shed, behind the bales, and he had to carry her back, kicking. The diabetes nurse said he needed to be firm, because it was not optional. He knew it was not optional. That was the whole trouble.

One evening in November he came in late from the shed, where a heifer had been calving all afternoon. He was more tired than he could remember being, and Winnie's test was due.

When he went to the dresser for the bag, Winnie was out of the back door before he had turned round.

He did not go after her.

He sat down on the back step instead, in the light from the kitchen door, with the bag on his knees. The yard was dark and smelled of cold and cattle. He could see her pale jumper by the gate, where she had stopped, watching to see if he was coming.

"Winnie," he called. Not loudly. "Come and sit down a minute. I'm not going to grab you."

She did not come. But she did not run any further either.

"This has got to be done before tea," he said. "That bit isn't up to me. It isn't up to you, either. It's just the way it is now." He unzipped the bag and laid the things out on the step beside him, slowly, one by one. "But when we do it, that can be up to you. I won't do it until you say now. I'm going to sit here. You tell me when."

Then he sat.

It was cold. The dog came and lay against his leg. Winnie walked along the gate and kicked at the gravel. He did not call her again. He told her instead, in an ordinary voice, about the calf: that it had come out backwards and been very cross about it, and had a white mark on its face shaped like a boot.

Winnie came a bit closer. "Can I see it?"

"After tea."

She kicked the gravel some more. Then she came and stood at the bottom of the step, and looked at the meter, and the lancet, and her father's hands.

"Which finger?" she said.

"You choose."

She held up her left hand and looked at each finger in turn, as though one of them might volunteer. Then she held out the smallest.

"That one."

He took it gently, and held it, and waited.

She looked at him. She looked at the lancet. The dog sighed and shifted against his boot.

"Now," said Winnie.

He did it. She flinched, and her eyes filled, and she did not pull away. Together they watched the little bead of blood come up, red and round, and he touched the strip to it, and the meter counted down from five, and Winnie counted down with it, out loud.

Then she went to see the calf.

It did not become easy. Some days the waiting went on longer than he liked. He rang the diabetes nurse and told her what he was doing, and she helped him work out how long the check before tea could wait and how long it could not, and wrote it into Winnie's care plan.

And there was one thing the waiting never touched. If Winnie was pale or shaky or muddled, or the meter said she was low, nobody waited for anybody. The juice went into her hand straight away, and the choosing could come afterwards. Winnie learned that rule too.

But for the ordinary checks, he never once did it before she had said the word. And slowly, over that winter, she began to say it sooner. She chose her finger before he had even unzipped the bag. In February she asked to hold the lancet herself, and he let her, and she pressed the button with her face screwed up tight. By then the sensor had come and the finger pricks were fewer, though the sensor needed changing every week or two. Winnie chose the arm.

The calf was called Wellington. That was Winnie's idea.

Some evenings, when the light from the kitchen door falls across the yard, you can still find them there: a big man on the back step with a zipped bag on his knee and a dog against his boots, and a girl in front of him, holding out an arm for a new sensor, or one small finger, as though she is asking a question in class.

He waits, as long as it is safe to wait.

"Now," she says.

Sit with this: When something must happen to a frightened child, what part of it could still be theirs to choose?



Things you might try

Stay in the storm. The next time a young child is in the middle of a tantrum or a fright, try not to fix it or stop it straight away. Get down to their height, or sit outside their door. Say what you think they are feeling, simply: "You're really cross that it's time to go." Then stay, and let them find out that their big feelings cannot send you away. If you snap, as we all do, go back afterwards and say sorry. That teaches as much as the staying.

Ask a different question. On the walk home, at the tea table or in the car, swap one of the usual questions for "What was your bravest try today?" Count the tries that did not work as well as the ones that did. Then let the child ask you back, and give them a true answer.

Follow what they love. If a child is frightened of a new place, a new person or a new thing, watch for what already draws them: a toy, an animal, a job, a sound. Lay it gently in their path and let it lead. A small, real task, looking after a key or filling a watering can or feeding the birds, can help a child far more than being told there is nothing to worry about. If your child is starting at a nursery, find out who their key person will be, the one who will look after them most closely, and tell that person what your child loves.

Lie down for ten minutes. At bedtime, or at the slowest part of the day, try being with a child rather than managing them. Lie beside them in the dark, or sit on the floor while they play, and do nothing but listen. Choose one ordinary daily task, a bath or getting dressed, and do it slowly: tell them what you are about to do, and wait for them to take part. If the bedtime story has started to feel like a test, put the test away for a while and simply read to them. And if you are a grandparent or a friend, perhaps the kindest thing you can offer a tired parent is not advice, but an hour so that they can rest.

Your story

Perhaps, as you read, someone came back to you: a grown-up who let you wear something ridiculous to the shops, or gave you a job when you were frightened, or let you say when you were ready. Or perhaps you have been that grown-up yourself, at the end of a long day. Stay with it for a moment. When you got something wrong as a small child, what did the nearest face tell you? And what would you like a child to read in yours?

CHAPTER 5

The Rhythm of the Day

A day with a shape that keeps coming back is a place where a small child can stand.

On Tuesday mornings a little boy stands at the front window of a house on an ordinary street, in his pyjamas, waiting for the bin lorry.

He is about two. He hears it before anyone else in the house does: the low grinding as it turns in at the top of the road, the hiss of the brakes, the clatter of the first bin going up and over. By the time it reaches his house he is pressed flat against the glass with both hands, and the men in their yellow jackets wave to him, and the driver gives one short toot on the horn. The boy bangs on the window with his palms, beside himself with joy. Then the lorry moves on, and he climbs down off the sofa and goes to have his breakfast.

He cannot read a calendar. He very likely does not know the word Tuesday. But he knows. His week has a shape, and the bin lorry is one of the posts it hangs on.

Then comes a bank holiday, and the collection moves to the Wednesday. On the Tuesday morning, there he is at the window anyway. He waits through his breakfast time and well past it. His mother comes and kneels beside him, explaining, with her hand on his back. He does not move. The next morning, when the lorry does come, he very nearly goes through the glass.

A young child lives by rhythm long before they live by the clock. Waking and sleeping, hungry and full, the walk to the shops, the song at bedtime, the lorry on a Tuesday: these are the beats by which a small person learns that the world can be trusted. A day that comes round in the same shape becomes ground under their feet. From

there they can wander off, and wonder at things, and come home again.

None of this asks for a perfect timetable. A good rhythm is only a few things, in the same order, offered warmly: the bath before the story, the light left on along the landing, the same breakfast bowl. Children do not find these repetitions dull. They are the beat a child can dance to.

But there is a difference between a rhythm that serves the child and a timetable the child is made to serve. One bends a little when a worm needs rescuing from the pavement. The other drags the child past it. One gives warning before an ending. The other just ends. Most of us live somewhere between the two. Much of the hurry in a small child's day is nobody's choice: the school bell at twenty to nine, the early shift, the bus that will not wait. Some of it, though, comes in with us from the job and the news and the bills, and on a good day that part need not be handed on. Nobody manages it every day.

Leave room, too, for what cannot be planned: the ladybird on the windowsill, the question that has to be answered now, the moment when you and a child stop together and look at something properly. Those are the moments in which children remember who they are. Very often they are the moments in which we remember too.

Not one of the families in this chapter has a perfect day. But in each of them, somewhere, a child is standing at a window, waiting for something they know will come.

37

The Empty Peg

Warren came to Patricia's house on a Thursday night in October, with a social worker, a carrier bag and one shoe. He was four. Nobody seemed to know where the other shoe was.

Patricia had been fostering for eleven years, in a terraced house at the top of a steep street in a mill town, with a kitchen that looked out over the rooftops to the hills. She had seen a good many children

arrive frightened. Warren was not frightened in the way she expected. He did not cry. He watched.

"What's after?" he asked, as soon as he had finished his toast.

"After toast? Teeth, and then we'll find you some shoes."

"What's after shoes?"

He asked it all day: at the shop, in the bath, at the bottom of the stairs with his hand on the banister. If the answer changed, even a little, he went stiff all over. The first time a neighbour knocked unexpectedly at the back door, Warren went behind the sofa and stayed there for an hour, and would not come out for a biscuit, or for the cat, or for anything at all.

The paperwork that came with him said a great deal about his behaviour. Patricia read it twice and put it in the drawer. What she noticed, over the next fortnight, was simpler. Wherever Warren had been before, the days had had no shape. Meals came, or did not. Bedtime was whenever the telly went off. He was not being awkward. He was keeping watch, because for most of his life nobody else had.

So one Saturday she took the old washing line from the shed, rinsed it under the tap, and strung it across the kitchen window between two cup hooks. She tipped a bag of wooden pegs onto the table and cut a cereal box into squares.

"I need a hand," she said. "I want to hang up our day, so we can both see it. Will you draw it with me?"

Warren looked at the line, and the pegs, and her. Then he picked up a felt pen.

He drew a bowl for breakfast, very round. He drew a red door for nursery. He drew a sandwich, and the swings at the park, and a bath with a duck on the side, and last of all a moon, coloured in so hard the card went shiny. He pegged them along the line one by one, took them all down, pegged them up in a different order, and then back in the first. Patricia drank her tea and did not help.

When the moon was up, he held out his hand for one more peg. He clipped it to the very end of the line with nothing on it.

"What's that one for?" Patricia asked.

Warren shrugged. "In case."

From then on, each part of the day came down when it was done and went into the old biscuit tin on the windowsill. Warren did it himself, standing on the step stool. By the end of the second week he had stopped asking "What's after?" every few minutes. He looked at the line instead.

It did not mend everything. There were still nights when he woke screaming and did not know where he was. But in the mornings the line was there, and he could see his day hanging in the window like washing.

On Wednesdays there was a picture of a blue door, which was the family centre, where he saw his mum for an hour.

One Wednesday in November the phone rang at ten past nine. His mum would not be coming. The social worker was very sorry.

Patricia stood in the kitchen with the phone in her hand and looked at the blue door on the line. She would have given a great deal not to have to say it. She knelt down by the step stool and told him, as plainly and gently as she could.

Warren looked at the blue door for a long time. Then he climbed up, unclipped it, and put it in the tin with the lid on. He took the empty peg from the end of the line and moved it into the gap.

"That's an in-case," he said.

"It is," said Patricia.

"What's after?"

"The park," she said. "Then fish fingers."

He nodded. He was very quiet at the park, and he did not eat much of his tea, and that night he slept with the biscuit tin in his bed. Patricia did not tell him he should feel better.

In the spring, a family was found for him: a couple in a village forty miles away, with a dog and a garden and a great deal of love waiting. On the morning he left, Warren took down the line himself, wound it round his hand, and packed it in his new rucksack with the pegs and the tin.

All except one. He clipped the empty peg to the collar of his coat, and it stayed there, all the way down the steep street to the car.

Sit with this: What does a child near you keep watch for? Could they help you hang the shape of their day where they can see it, with one place left empty, in case?

38

Sunday in the Caravan

The river came into the house on a Tuesday night in February, and by Wednesday morning it had taken the ground floor.

Felicity was seven. She lived with her dads, Alexander and Paul, in an old stone house on the edge of a village, near enough to the river to hear it in the dark. She had always liked hearing it. Now she went quiet whenever it was mentioned.

The insurance paid for a caravan on the drive while the house dried out. It was cream, with a brown stripe, and it smelled of other people's holidays. The walls of the house were stripped back to the stone. Three dehumidifiers roared day and night in the empty rooms, and the floorboards were stacked in the garden under a tarpaulin.

In the caravan there was a two-ring hob, a fridge the size of a suitcase, and a table that folded down from the wall and became Felicity's bed at night.

Before the flood, Sunday dinner had been the beat of the whole week. Alexander did the roast. Paul did pudding, usually something with custard. Felicity laid the table in the dining room with the good knives, folded the paper napkins into fans, and wrote everyone's name on a little card, even though there were only ever three of them and everyone knew where to sit.

The first Sunday in the caravan, dinner was not mentioned. Paul made beans on toast. They ate it on their knees. Felicity did not finish hers.

That night Paul lay awake on the narrow bunk and listened to her turning over and over on the table bed.

The next Sunday, he put a carrier bag in front of her: plastic plates, a pack of paper napkins, a pen, and some card.

"Sunday's still Sunday," he said. "We can't do a roast. But you're in charge of the table."

Felicity peered into the bag. Then she took it outside and sat on the caravan step with it.

She decided they would have sausages, because sausages could be done on two rings. She went down the lane and came back with three daffodils from the verge and put them in a mug. She folded the napkins into fans. She wrote the cards.

When they sat down there were four places.

The fourth card said HOUSE. It was set at the end of the table, facing the little window that looked across the drive to the dark, stripped front room.

"So it knows it's Sunday," said Felicity, and passed the ketchup.

Alexander opened his mouth, closed it again, and looked at Paul.

After that the fourth place was laid every week, with a plate and a fan-folded napkin and, sometimes, a sausage, which Paul quietly ate later. Felicity chose the menu on Saturday night and wrote it on the back of the card. Some weeks it was sausages, some weeks fish fingers, once a very ambitious curry from a packet that set off the smoke alarm. The table was too small. Alexander always banged his knee on the leg. Nobody suggested stopping.

The house took longer than anyone had said. There was damp in the back wall that had to be dug out. There was a builder who did not come back. In May there was a letter from the insurance company, and Alexander read it standing on the drive, and then went and sat in the car with the radio on and the engine off.

That Sunday he said he did not want dinner. He said it quite sharply. He would get something later.

Felicity did not argue. She laid the table anyway. Four places. She put his card where it always went, and she sat down, and she waited.

After a while the car door opened. Alexander came in, banged his knee on the table leg, and sat down.

"What are we having, then?" he said.

"Fish fingers," said Felicity. "And there's peas."

The house was finished in the middle of July. The new floor smelled of varnish, and the walls were a colour Felicity had chosen. On the Monday a man was coming with a lorry to tow the caravan away.

On the Sunday before, she laid the caravan table one last time: three places, and a fourth facing the window, with a card that said HOUSE. When they had eaten, she wrote one more card and left it propped against the mug of buttercups for whoever had the caravan next. It said, IT IS STILL SUNDAY HERE.

The first Sunday back in the house, Alexander made a roast, and Paul made a crumble with far too much custard, and Felicity laid the table in the dining room with the good knives.

She laid four places. The fourth faced the window, and the square of pale, flattened grass on the drive where the caravan had been.

Sit with this: When your own family's life was turned upside down, what kept going, and who kept it going?

39

Over, Under, Over

Audrey's great-gran, Valerie, had been a hairdresser on the same high street for nearly fifty years. She had done the brides and the mothers of the brides, the school photographs, the funerals. People in that seaside town still stopped Audrey's mum in the supermarket to say, "Your gran did my hair for my wedding."

Now Valerie was ninety-one, and she lived in a care home on the hill above the town, and she did not know any of them.

Audrey was five. She went on Saturday mornings with her mum, who found the visits very hard. Valerie would sit in her chair by the window, neat in a cardigan someone else had buttoned, and look at them with polite, faraway eyes. Sometimes she said, "Are you from the council?" Sometimes she said nothing at all.

Audrey's mum did most of the talking: the weather, the roadworks, the price of things. Audrey sat on the footstool, swung her legs and watched the seagulls.

One Saturday they were going on to a birthday party afterwards. Audrey's hair was long and fine and always in knots, and the mornings were a battle with the brush. That morning there had not been time. So her mum brought the brush in her bag and, halfway through the visit, sat Audrey on the footstool in front of her and began to work at the tangles.

Audrey wriggled and said "Ow" in a voice that meant she was not really hurt but wanted it known.

Valerie's hands moved on the arm of her chair.

Then they reached out. She took the brush from her granddaughter's hand, quite firmly, the way you take something that is yours. Audrey's mum was about to take it back, but one of the carers in the doorway shook her head very slightly. Let her.

Valerie did not brush from the top, as Audrey's mum always did. She took the ends of the hair in one hand and brushed them out first, working upwards in small, quick strokes, and the knots came loose without a single "Ow". Then she drew a parting with the side of one finger, straight as a ruler, and took three locks of hair from the crown.

Her lips began to move.

"Over, under, over," she said under her breath. "Over, under, over."

Her hands went in and out of Audrey's hair, gathering a little more at each pass, steady as a clock. Audrey stopped wriggling. She sat with her eyes wide and her hands in her lap, the way you sit when something important is happening behind you and you must not spoil it.

"Keep still for me, pet," said Valerie.

Audrey's mum put her hand over her mouth. Her gran had said that to her, on that same kind of footstool in the back room of the salon, before every school photograph she had ever had taken. Keep still for me, pet. She had not heard it in nearly three years.

The plait went all the way down Audrey's back. Valerie held out her hand without looking, and the carer, who had understood, put a hair band into it. Valerie twisted it on, three times, and patted the plait once, as if to say it would do.

Then she sat back and looked out at the gulls, and her face went faraway again.

Audrey would not let anyone take the plait out. She went to the party in it. She slept in it. On Tuesday her mum finally persuaded her, and the hair came out in long, rippling waves, and Audrey looked at herself in the mirror as though she had been given something.

Every Saturday after that, Audrey brought the brush.

They had a way of doing it. Audrey sat on the footstool. Her mum put the brush into Valerie's hand. For a moment, sometimes, nothing happened, and Audrey would wait, very still. Then the hands would remember. Over, under, over. Sometimes it was one plait and sometimes two, and once, astonishingly, a fishtail, which none of the carers knew how to do.

Valerie never did know Audrey's name, or her mum's. Nobody pretended she did. Some weeks Audrey's mum still sat in the car afterwards with her hands on the steering wheel, not starting the engine.

But Valerie knew hair. And every Saturday morning, for ten minutes, in the window above the town, the three of them were in the back room of the salon again.

In the winter, Audrey began trying it herself. She practised on her doll, on the fringe of a scarf, on three lengths of wool tied to the back of a kitchen chair, muttering under her breath.

One evening her mum was sitting at the kitchen table doing the bills, and felt small hands lift the hair at the back of her neck.

"Over, under, over," said Audrey. "Keep still for me, pet."

Sit with this: What does your family carry in its hands, in the ways it cooks, mends, plaits or folds, that it might not carry any other way?

40

The Front Seat

Philip spent Mondays and Wednesdays with his grandad, Ernest, while his mum worked early shifts at the bakery. He was three. And on Mondays and Wednesdays they took the number 38 into town.

Ernest had been a postman for thirty-four years. He knew every street the bus went down, and which houses had a dog. He was a kind man and a quiet one, and he liked to read the paper on the bus.

Philip did not like anything quiet.

Why is that lady's umbrella inside out? Why are we stopping? Where does the bus sleep? Why has that man got a ladder? Why is it called a zebra crossing? Why does the bell go ding?

Ernest answered for the first few stops. After that he answered from behind the paper. "Because it is." "It just does." "Ask your mum."

One Wednesday, on the way home, Philip was looking out of the window and asked a question in a small voice. "Why is the sky going dark?"

Then he answered it himself. "It just does," he said, in exactly his grandad's voice. And he went back to looking out of the window.

Ernest lowered the paper.

He folded it and kept it folded on his knee all the way home. That evening, after Philip had gone back to his mum's, Ernest sat in his chair with the television off and the paper unread.

The next Monday, when the number 38 pulled in, he took Philip by the hand and went straight up the stairs to the top deck. The front seat was empty. It nearly always was at that time of the morning.

"Right," said Ernest. "This is the asking seat. When we sit here, you can ask me anything, and I'll give you a proper answer. And if I don't know, we'll find somebody who does."

Philip looked at him. "Anything?"

"Anything."

Philip gripped the rail in front of him with both hands and thought about it. Then, testing, he said, "Why is it called a zebra crossing?"

Ernest did not know. He said so. He said they would ask somebody.

They asked the driver, at the bus station in town. The driver thought it was because of the stripes, and then he and Ernest had a long talk about Belisha beacons while Philip stood between them, looking from one to the other.

After that, the front seat on the top deck was where the questions went. The ride into town took twenty-two minutes and twelve stops, and it filled up fast. Why do pigeons walk with their heads? Why has that house got a face on it? Why is the canal not moving? Where do the bus tickets go?

Ernest answered what he could. When he could not, he wrote the question on the back of his bus ticket, and they took the ticket round town to find out. They asked the man on the fruit stall about bananas. They asked the lady in the library about canals, and she found them a book with a picture of a lock in it, which Philip took home and slept with. They asked a workman in a hole in the road what was down there, and he let Philip look.

Some mornings Ernest's knees were bad and the stairs to the top deck were a long way. Some mornings it rained and the front window steamed up and you could not see anything at all. They went up anyway. Philip drew faces in the steam.

Somewhere around Christmas, without quite noticing, Ernest started looking too.

He had walked these streets for thirty-four years with his eyes on the letterboxes. From the top deck you saw them from above. He saw that the old bank on the corner had stone faces carved under its roof, one laughing and one with its tongue out. He saw that the terraces along Mill Road had dates set over the doors, 1887, 1889, 1891, as though the street had been built one year at a time. He saw a garden on top of a garage, with a deckchair in it.

"Philip," he said one morning, "why do you think they put faces on the bank?"

Philip looked at the faces, and then at his grandad, very pleased.

"Let's ask somebody," he said.

In the spring, Philip started at nursery, and the Mondays stopped. Ernest found that he still went into town on a Monday morning anyway, for the paper and his bits of shopping. He still went up the stairs. He still sat in the front seat.

One Monday, going over the canal bridge, he saw a cormorant standing on the roof of a narrowboat with its wings held wide, perfectly still, like a black umbrella someone had left open to dry.

He had no bus ticket to hand. So he took the pen from his inside pocket and wrote on the back of his hand, in careful capitals: CORMORANT. WHY WINGS OUT.

He kept it there until Wednesday.

Sit with this: What happens to a child's questions in your house on a busy day? What was the last thing you wondered about yourself?

41

Two Hundred Pairs of Hands

Every Friday afternoon, the whole of Hillside Primary sang.

It was the best part of the week, the children said. Two hundred of them sat cross-legged in rows on the hall floor, the little ones at the front and the big ones on benches at the back, and Mrs Bramley played the piano with her elbows going, and the noise could be heard all the way down to the post office.

Cecily was six, and she was deaf.

She had been born deaf, like her mum. At home they talked in sign language, fast and funny, across the kitchen and up the stairs and through the car window at the school gate. At school she had a teaching assistant, Ms Kaur, who signed for her in lessons, a hearing

aid that helped a little, and a best friend called Basil who had learned to sign "biscuit" and "go away" and not much else.

Fridays were the hardest time of the week.

In singing, everyone else was doing something together, and Cecily could not join it. She could feel the piano through the floor, a sort of shaking. She could see the mouths opening and closing at the same time. But the words came too fast for Ms Kaur to sign, and the tune did not come at all. Cecily sat in the second row with her hands tucked under her knees and looked at the floor. Mrs Bramley, looking out over the top of the piano, noticed that she did it every single week.

One Friday in the spring term, the song was one they had sung since September, about a river going down to the sea. The chorus came round for the third time.

And Cecily began to sign it.

She did not do it for anybody. She did it the way you hum when you think nobody is listening. Her hands made the river, and the hills, and the long way down, and the sea opening out flat at the end. She had watched the mouths so many times that she knew where the words fell, and her hands fell with them.

Basil, next to her, stopped singing and stared.

Then the boy on her other side stopped. Then a whole patch of the second row had gone quiet, and was watching Cecily's hands.

Mrs Bramley saw it over the top of the piano, and stopped playing.

For a moment the hall was completely still. Cecily looked up, saw everybody looking, went red, and sat on her hands.

"Cecily," said Mrs Bramley, and Ms Kaur signed it, "would you show us how to do that? Just the chorus. I think we'd all like to learn it."

Cecily did not want to. Then she looked at Ms Kaur, who nodded, and at Basil, who said "Go on" very loudly, and she stood up.

She stood at the front beside the piano and signed the chorus slowly, line by line, and two hundred children copied her. They got it

wrong. They made the river go uphill. One of the infants signed the sea so enthusiastically that he hit the girl next to him. Cecily showed them again, and by the fourth time the whole hall had it.

Then Mrs Bramley played, and they sang it and signed it together. Cecily stood at the front and watched two hundred pairs of hands making the river, all at once, and for the first time on a Friday she was not watching anybody's mouth.

After that, every song had signs. Cecily and her mum worked them out at the kitchen table on Thursday nights, and Cecily taught them on Friday. Ms Kaur started a signing club at lunchtime, and forty children came. Some of the children who had never liked singing, who mumbled at the back or stared at the ceiling, turned out to like signing very much. Basil learned a great deal more than "biscuit".

The singing changed. It was slower, because you cannot sign as fast as you can shout. It was also, the dinner ladies said, much better to listen to.

In June the piano broke. A string went halfway through a song, with a twang like a ruler on a desk, and the tuner could not come until the week after.

Mrs Bramley sat on the piano stool and thought for a moment.

"Well," she said. "We could sing without it."

A girl on the back bench put her hand up. "Or we could not sing at all," she said, "and just do the hands."

So they did. The river song, all the way through, with no piano and no voices. Two hundred children sat in rows on the hall floor and made the river with their hands, and the hills, and the long way down, and the sea opening out at the end.

It was so quiet you could hear the rain on the roof.

Cecily, in the second row, did not need to watch anybody. She knew exactly where everyone was.

Sit with this: Is there a child near you who has only one way to join in, and cannot use it? What else might they be able to bring, if there were room for it?

42

Three Waves and a Toot

Every Friday at half past five, in the far corner of the big supermarket car park off the bypass, two cars pulled in three bays apart and switched off their engines.

The silver hatchback was Carly's. The white van with the ladders on the roof was Tony's. In the back of the hatchback, kicking the seat in front with both wellies, was Kai, who was four, and who belonged to both of them.

The supermarket had been the solicitor's idea. It was halfway between Carly's new flat and the house Tony had kept, it had cameras, and it was always busy, which everyone agreed was a good thing without anybody saying why. On Sundays they did the whole thing the other way round.

Nothing went across with Kai. He had a toothbrush in each house, pyjamas in each house, a cup with a dinosaur on it in each house. Carly had insisted on that, and Tony, for once, had agreed. There was nothing to hand over but the boy himself.

And they did not speak. Not since a Sunday in March, when they had spoken in this car park so loudly that a man with a trolley full of lager had stopped to watch. Now Carly unbuckled Kai, walked him the three bays and stood back. Tony lifted him into the van, buckled him in, shut the door and got into the front. Nobody looked at anybody. It took about a minute. It was the worst minute of the week for all three of them.

Kai watched it, the way small children watch everything. He had stopped asking why Mummy didn't come in the van, and why Daddy didn't say hello. He sang to himself while it happened, mostly about diggers.

Then, one Friday in May, he would not get in.

He stood on the tarmac between the two cars with his arms stiff at his sides.

"We haven't done goodbye," he said.

Carly and Tony both looked at him. It was the nearest they had come to looking at each other in two months.

"You have to wave," said Kai. "Three times. Like this." He showed them: one, two, three, his whole arm going, the way he waved at the bin men. "And then Daddy goes toot. One toot. Not two. Two is cross."

"Kai, mate," said Tony. "Get in the van."

Kai sat down on the tarmac.

People were going past with trolleys. A woman loading her boot had stopped to see what would happen. Carly felt the old heat come up into her face. She opened her mouth to say something sharp to somebody, she did not know who.

Instead, because her son was sitting in a car park in his good trousers, she lifted her hand and waved. One, two, three.

Kai turned round and looked at his dad. He waited.

Tony stared at the windscreen. Then he got back out of the van, which nobody had expected, and lifted his hand and waved at Kai, in the same direction as Carly, because there was no other way to do it. One, two, three.

Kai got up, climbed into his seat and let himself be buckled. As the van pulled out, Tony pressed the horn once. Not two.

On the Sunday, Kai explained that it went the other way round now. Daddy waved. Mummy tooted.

So that became goodbye. Kai checked it every time. If the waves were half-hearted, he made them do it again. He counted out loud. Once Tony tooted twice by accident, and Kai shouted "That's cross!" through the van window, and Carly, standing by her car, laughed before she could stop herself. Tony heard it. He did not start the engine straight away.

It did not make them friends. There were still letters from solicitors. There was still a Sunday in July when Tony was forty minutes late, and Carly sat in the hatchback going over everything she would say to him. When the van finally came round the corner, she got out with all of it ready.

Kai was asleep in the back.

They stood on either side of the open van door and looked at him: mouth open, one welly off, a crisp stuck to his cheek. Tony lifted him out very carefully and carried him across, and laid him in his seat and buckled him in without waking him.

Then there was nobody to count.

Tony stood by the hatchback with his hands at his sides. Carly stood by the open door with all the things she had been going to say.

Tony lifted his hand. One, two, three.

Carly got into the car, started the engine and looked at him through the windscreen. She pressed the horn once.

Then, for no reason she could have given, and against every rule Kai had ever made, she pressed it again, very lightly.

Tony, alone in the far corner of the car park, lifted his hand one more time.

Sit with this: When a child goes between two homes, what does the handover look like from where they stand? What would they want to keep?

43

Carried

Rufus was ten months old when his mum went back to work, driving buses, and he started at a day nursery on the ground floor of an office block near the city centre.

For the first nine months of his life he had hardly been put down. His nana had come over from Accra when he was born, to help, and she had carried him everywhere: to the shops, round the flat, up and down the landing while she cooked and talked on the phone. She carried him the way she had carried his mum, on her back, tied in a long length of patterned cloth knotted above her chest. That was where Rufus slept. He fell asleep to the sway of her walking and the hum of her voice through her back, and woke when she sat down.

At the nursery he did not sleep at all.

The baby room was bright and clean and kind. There was a row of cots in a quiet room with a blind, and a white noise machine, and the staff did everything the books said. Rufus screamed. He screamed when he was put down, and when he was picked up and put down again, and when he was rocked in the buggy in the corridor. He went stiff as a plank and screamed until he was too tired to scream, then dozed for ten minutes, and woke, and screamed again.

The staff were patient with him. They were fond of him. They began to call him, fondly, the foghorn. "Foghorn's up," they would say, when the sound came down the corridor, and someone would put down what they were doing and go.

His key person, Charlotte, was twenty-two and had worked at the nursery for a year. In Rufus's third week she noticed that his mum, at pick-up time, flinched when she heard the word foghorn. She noticed it again the next day.

On the Friday, Charlotte asked her, "How does he sleep at home?"

His mum looked embarrassed. "My mum carries him," she said. "On her back, in a cloth. I know you can't do that here."

Charlotte thought about it. "Why can't we?" she said.

On Monday, Rufus's nana came to pick-up instead. She stood in the nursery corridor in her good coat, by the pegs and the paintings, and taught Charlotte how to tie him on.

It was harder than it looked. You had to bend right forward and slide the baby round onto your back, and hold him there with one hand while you swung the cloth over him with the other, and tuck it, and pull it, and tie a knot that would hold. Charlotte's first try left Rufus slipping sideways like a bag of shopping. Her second was better. On the third, Nana tugged at the knot, stepped back, laughed out loud, and said something to Rufus that Charlotte did not understand but that made him laugh too.

The nursery manager came out of her office to watch, with a slightly worried look. She went away and read up on back-carrying,

and ordered a proper wrap with safety instructions on the label. But she said yes.

The wrap came on the Thursday. At a quarter to eleven, Charlotte tied Rufus onto her back with it, the way Nana had shown her, and asked a colleague to check that he was snug and high, with his face clear.

He was cross at first. He arched and grumbled. Charlotte did what Nana had told her: she did not stand still. She walked. She laid out the snack, and wiped the tables, and sorted the bibs, and went up and down the room humming, not any particular tune. Rufus's grumbling slowed. His head went down against her shoulder blade.

He slept for fifty minutes.

After that, it became part of the day. At a quarter to eleven, and again after lunch, someone in the baby room tied Rufus on, and he slept while they worked, with whoever was nearest glancing at him every few minutes. The other staff learned to do it too, though Charlotte's knot was the best. When he was on someone's back, the others kept the noise down at that end of the room without being asked, and the cook brought the lunch trolley round the long way.

Somewhere in those weeks, without anybody deciding it, the word foghorn stopped being used. Instead people said, "Rufus is having his cloth." His mum noticed. She began sending him in with his nana's second-best cloth folded in the bottom of his bag, so that he would have something with him that smelled of home.

Rufus stayed at the nursery until he was three. By the end he slept on a mat with the others, like any toddler, and did not need carrying at all.

But on his last afternoon, Charlotte looked up from the craft table and saw him in the home corner. He had a teddy on his back, tied there with a tea towel, knotted badly above his chest. He was walking slowly up and down beside the toy cooker, swaying, humming to himself, not any particular tune.

"Shh," he said, when he saw her looking. "He's having his cloth."

Sit with this: When a child is away from home, at a nursery, in hospital, with strangers, what one small rhythm from home could go with them?

44

The Children's House in San Lorenzo

A true story

On 6 January 1907, in the San Lorenzo district of Rome, a doctor named Maria Montessori opened a room for children in a block of tenements on Via dei Marsi.

San Lorenzo was a poor district. It was crowded, and it was known for disease and for crime. Most of the parents who lived in the tenements worked all day, and while they were at work their children, between two and six years old, had been left to roam the building with no one to watch over them.

Fifty of those children were brought to the new room on its first day. According to the accounts of that day, they arrived frightened and crying.

Fifty small children, most of them under five, who had never had a place of their own in the world, brought into a strange room by adults they did not know. Anyone who has ever settled a single toddler into a nursery will know something of what that first morning must have been like.

Montessori called the room the Casa dei Bambini. In English, the Children's House.

What she put into it was simple, and at the time it was surprising. She filled it with furniture small enough for the children to lift and carry for themselves. And she gave them materials they could choose for themselves and use with their own hands.

To a three-year-old, that matters more than it sounds. Nearly everything in a small child's world is built for somebody else. Tables are too high. Chairs are too heavy. Taps are out of reach. Doors are hard to open. A child lives most of the time in a house made for

giants, and has to be lifted up to everything. A chair that a child can pick up and carry across the room says something without a word being spoken. It says: this was made for you. You belong here.

Then Montessori did something that surprised the adults who came to watch. She let the children choose their own work. And once they had chosen it, she did not interrupt them.

Most of us, if we are honest, interrupt children all day long. We call them to the table, hurry them into coats, ask how they are getting on, show them a quicker way. Usually we mean well. Montessori did something much harder. She waited, and she watched, and she let the work belong to the child.

Over the months that followed, the children of San Lorenzo, who had been left to roam their building, began to concentrate deeply. They would choose an activity and repeat it again and again with steady, sustained attention.

Years later, in her book *The Secret of Childhood*, Montessori wrote about one small girl she watched in those early days. The child was so absorbed in what she was doing that, in Montessori's words, "her ego had withdrawn itself from the reach of any external stimulus." In plainer language, the little girl was so deep in her work that the rest of the world had simply fallen away.

The stories that come down to us from that room do not tell us the names of most of those fifty children, or what became of them. But they tell us this much. These were not, it turned out, difficult children. They were children with nowhere made for them. What they had been waiting for was not, in the first place, a lesson. It was a place that was ready to receive them, and enough unhurried time inside it to become absorbed in something of their own choosing.

The Children's House did not stay a single room. From that one room in a Rome tenement grew a way of teaching that is now found in schools all over the world.

But it began with fifty frightened children, a room full of things their own size, and a grown-up who knew when to step back and let them be.

Sit with this: What absorbs a child you love so completely that the room falls away? What usually brings them back out of it?

45

Wednesdays Are Taken

Struan's week was colour-coded.

It lived on his mum's phone and on his dad's, and it pinged them both at a quarter to three every afternoon. Monday was green, for football. Tuesday was blue, for swimming. Wednesday was orange, for Mandarin. Thursday was purple, for piano. Friday was red, for drama at the arts centre, where Struan made a very convincing tree.

He was six. He had a bedroom with a window seat, a teacher who called him a delight, and a mum and dad who loved him so much they could not bear for him to miss anything.

On Tuesdays there was no time to change at the pool, so Struan changed in the back of the car on the way from school: jumper off, trunks on, coat over the top, goggles on his forehead. His mum, Sadie, had it down to a fine art.

On a Tuesday in November she pulled into the leisure-centre car park, turned round and said, "Right, superstar."

He was asleep.

He had slumped sideways in his car seat, in his blue trunks and school socks, his coat slipping off one shoulder. One hand still held his school jumper, as though he had gone to sleep halfway through taking it off.

Sadie sat with the engine running and looked at him. Other children went past with their swimming bags. The lesson started. She did not wake him.

He slept for forty minutes. When he woke it was dark, and he stared at the lit-up glass front of the leisure centre in a panic.

"Have I missed it?"

"You have," said Sadie. "It doesn't matter."

He burst into tears, and that frightened her more than the sleeping had.

That night she put her phone on the kitchen table in front of his dad and showed him the week. Five colours. Seven, if you counted Saturday football and the Sunday swimming catch-up. He scrolled through it with his thumb, and then back again.

"When does he just play?" he said.

Neither of them could answer.

They did not cancel everything. They were frightened of getting it wrong the other way too. But at breakfast on Saturday they asked Struan which day he would like to have nothing in it.

He looked at them as though it were a trick question.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," said his dad. "No club. Just home."

Struan thought about it very seriously, with his spoon in the air.

"Wednesday," he said. "Because it's in the middle."

The first empty Wednesday was terrible. Sadie had moved her hours to collect him at three, and by twenty past they were home, and Struan stood in the hall in his coat.

"What are we doing?"

"Nothing."

"But what?"

He followed her from room to room. He said he was bored eleven times. He asked for the tablet, was told no, and lay face down on the rug to announce that this was the worst day of his life. Sadie very nearly rang the Mandarin teacher.

At about half past four, it went quiet.

She found him on the landing with the recycling bag. He had taken out every kitchen-roll tube and the long box from the cling film and was taping them to the banisters with her parcel tape, zigzagging down the stairs. He had found a marble from somewhere. He let it go at the top. It went down two tubes and shot sideways into the bathroom.

"Hang on," said Struan, to nobody, and went after it.

He was still there at teatime. He was there the next Wednesday too, because nobody had tidied it away. Things made on a Wednesday, he had decided, stayed up until the next Wednesday, and Sadie found she did not mind stepping over them. By Christmas the run went all the way from the top landing to the hall, through a cereal box, a jam funnel and an old welly.

In January a mum from his class came over at the school gate, pink with news. A chess club was starting, with a proper coach from the county team. Places were like gold dust. Wednesdays at half past three. She had kept one for Struan.

"Oh," said Sadie. "That's so kind. He'd love—"

She felt a tug at her coat.

"Wednesday's empty," said Struan.

"It's only an hour, love."

He did not argue. He looked up at her with the face of someone guarding something, and said it again. "It's empty."

Sadie thought of the forty minutes in the leisure-centre car park, and the goggles on his forehead.

"Thank you," she said to the other mum. "But I'm afraid Wednesdays are taken."

That afternoon Struan added a yoghurt pot to the top of the run, and the long tube from inside last year's wrapping paper. At half past five he let the marble go.

It rolled along the landing, through the cling-film box, round the yoghurt pot, down the wrapping-paper tube, through the cereal box and the jam funnel, and dropped with a soft clunk into the welly at the bottom of the stairs.

Struan sat on the top step and did it again. And again. And nobody called him to the car.

Sit with this: What does the week of a child you love feel like from the inside? Which parts would they keep, if they were asked?

Things you might try

Make the day together. If a child in your care struggles with change, try making a picture of the day with them: drawings, photos or cut-out pictures in a row on the fridge or by their bed. Let them choose the pictures and take each one off when it is done. And add a card for "something different", so that when the day has to change there is already a place for it. If changes still bring big, lasting distress, talk it over with someone who knows your child well; you do not have to work it out alone.

Give warning before endings. Before you call a child away from their play, go to them first. Look at what they are doing. Then offer a short, clear count to the end: two more marbles down the run, three more goes on the slide, one more page. Then say what comes next, and what comes after that. A child who knows an ending is coming can usually walk towards it.

Keep a time for wondering. Find twenty minutes in the day, the same time each day if you can, when a child's questions are always welcome. A walk round the block after tea, the bath, the car on the way to school. Answer what you can. When you can't, say "Let's find out," write it down, and look it up together at the weekend. And if the week is full of clubs, think about keeping one afternoon with nothing booked in it at all. You may find that you start wondering again too.

Carry one rhythm with you. When a family's life is upset by illness, a hospital stay, a house move, a separation or a spell in temporary housing, choose one small rhythm from home and keep it going wherever you are: Sunday dinner, the bedtime song, the Saturday plait, the same goodbye at every handover. If you can, put the child in charge of it. And if you work with children in a hospital, a nursery or a care home, ask the family what that rhythm is, and help to protect it.

Your story

What came round in your own childhood, whatever else was happening? Perhaps it was a song at bedtime, a walk on a Sunday, or the smell of the same supper on the same night every week. Perhaps you have kept a rhythm going for a child through a hard season, or watched a child invent one when the grown-ups had run out of words. Take a moment with it. Who kept that beat for you, and who are you keeping it for now?

CHAPTER 6

The First Classroom

Before there was a school, there was the world, and it has never stopped teaching.

There is an old garden wall on the way to the nursery, the kind that runs along the front of a big house nobody seems to live in. Nobody would call it beautiful. The bricks are stained, someone has stuck a sticker for a plumber on the end of it, and on wet days the gutter overflows and the water runs down the pavement in a little brown stream.

A young mum comes along it with a pushchair. They are running late, the way mornings do, and she has stopped to answer her phone, and the little boy in the pushchair, who cannot be more than two, is leaning so far out sideways that it looks as if he will tip the whole thing over.

He is looking at the wall. More exactly, he is looking at the moss in the gaps between the bricks: tiny green cushions, bright as a tennis ball after the rain. He puts out one finger and presses it, very gently, and takes his finger away and looks at it. Then he presses it again.

His mum glances down. Here it comes, surely: "Don't touch that, it's dirty." Let us be honest, most of us have said it, more times than we would like to count, usually while looking at the clock.

She doesn't say it. She crouches down beside the pushchair, puts her own finger on the moss, and says, "Soft. Isn't it soft?"

He looks at her as if she has told him the most important thing in the world.

Then she checks the time, and they set off again, and the pavement is empty. It is a small thing, the kind that happens a hundred times a day and is gone in a minute. Nothing was planned.

Nobody had bought a nature kit or booked a trip. There was a wall, and some moss, and a child who had noticed it, and a grown-up who knelt down instead of hurrying him on.

That, I think, is most of what this chapter is about.

A young child does not need to be taught to be curious about the living world. They arrive curious. The rain on the window, the ant on the step, the conker in its spiky case, the smell of cut grass: all of it is news to them, and all of it is interesting. What they need is to be let near it, and to have someone beside them who has not forgotten how to look.

It is easy to feel that this belongs to other people. To families with big gardens and a wood at the end of the lane, with a car for the weekends and money for holidays by the sea. Many of us live in flats, or on busy roads, or in towns where the nearest field is a bus ride away. Some of us cannot walk far. None of that is anybody's fault. But it can quietly teach a child that the living world is somewhere else, somewhere you go on special days, if you are lucky.

It isn't. It turns up everywhere if you look: on a ninth-floor walkway, in a hospital window, in the trees along a street you have walked a thousand times without seeing them. The sky is free. The rain falls on everyone.

Weather is real, and roads are real, and worries about dirt and danger are real too. They can be held wisely. A child who comes home with mud on their knees and a pocketful of stones has not made a mess that needs clearing up before the learning can start. That is the learning.

And there is a gift in it for the grown-ups, too. When you crouch beside a child at an old wall with your finger on the moss, you are not only teaching them. You are being reminded of something you once knew.

46

Rough and Smooth

Rex was four, and he had about a dozen words. He used them sparingly, as if they cost money.

What he used instead were his hands. He ran them along everything. The railings outside the flats, the bristly doormat, the cold glass of the bus window, the fur of next door's cat, which put up with it. His dad, Raymond, who cleaned offices in the evenings and had Rex in the daytime while Rex's mum was at work, spent a good part of every day saying "Hands, Rex," and gently lifting them off things.

Rex had been assessed. There was a word for him now, written on a letter in the kitchen drawer, and a waiting list for speech therapy that seemed to get no shorter. Raymond did what the leaflets said. He read to him every night. He narrated everything. "Now we're putting on your shoes. Now we're going down the stairs." Rex listened politely and said nothing.

Behind the library there was a community garden: raised beds made of old scaffold boards, a shed with a padlock, a plane tree, and a woman called Mrs Achebe who seemed to run it, as far as anyone could tell, simply by being there every morning. Raymond started going because it was free, and because it was somewhere to go that wasn't the flat.

On the first morning, Rex walked straight to the plane tree and put both hands flat on the trunk.

Raymond opened his mouth to say "Hands." Then he didn't, because Mrs Achebe was watching, and because Rex looked, for once, completely calm.

The bark of a plane tree flakes off in patches, so the trunk looks like a map: grey and olive and cream. Rex was moving his palms slowly from one patch to the next, his face very close to it, as if he were listening.

"He likes that one," said Mrs Achebe, coming over with a bucket. "It's got three different skins. Feel." She put her own hand next to his. "That bit's rough. That bit's smooth. See?"

Rex did not look at her. But he moved his hand from the rough bit to the smooth bit, and back again.

"Rough," said Mrs Achebe, on the rough bit. "Smooth."

They went back the next day, and the day after. Mrs Achebe found things for Rex to touch the way other people find things for children to look at. The lamb's ear plant, grey and soft as a pocket lining. "Furry." The teasel by the compost heap. "Prickly. Careful." The cold, wet underside of a watering can. A snail shell, empty, light as paper. A handful of sand from the bag by the shed, which ran out between his fingers.

And Raymond, who had spent two years taking his son's hands off things, began to put his own hands on them too.

It felt silly at first. A grown man stroking a plant. But he found that when he did it, Rex looked at him. Not for long. A glance, sideways, as if checking that his dad had noticed the same thing.

In October, when the leaves were coming down, Rex bent and picked one up from the path. A big plane leaf, brown and crisp at the edges. He held it out to Raymond.

Raymond took it. He was going to say "Thank you," the way he always did, filling the silence.

"Rough," said Rex.

Raymond stood very still on the path.

It was not the right word, strictly speaking. The leaf was more crackly than rough. But it was Rex's word, offered for the first time, without anyone asking for it, and it was about a thing they were both holding.

"Rough," Raymond said back. "Yes. It's rough." He said it again at the bus stop, and once more on the stairs, just to hear the word in the air between them.

It did not change everything. There were still days of meltdowns on the stairs and nights when nothing worked. The waiting list was

still the waiting list, and when the speech therapist came at last in the spring, she was as important as everyone had said she would be.

But she asked Raymond, at the end of the first session, whether there was anything Rex particularly responded to.

Raymond thought about it. Then he went to the bag by the door and took out the shoebox they kept now: the snail shell, a piece of bark, a teasel head, a feather, a smooth grey pebble from the canal path, the plane leaf, gone brittle.

Rex came over at once, knelt down, and put his hand in the box.

"Smooth," he said, holding up the pebble, and looked at his dad to make sure he had heard.

Sit with this: Where does a child's attention go when nobody is steering it? What might happen if we followed it for a while?

47

The Snail on the Green Bin

Janice had read about the forest kindergarten in a magazine at the dentist's, and she had not stopped thinking about it for a year.

Children of three and four and five, out among the trees all day in every weather, building dens, cooking on a fire, coming home muddy to the eyebrows and sleeping like logs. There were photographs. Rosy faces in waterproof suits. She looked at them, and then at her own daughter, Tina, who was four and frightened of most things, and thought: that is what she needs. That will make her brave.

It cost more than the nursery round the corner, and it was two buses away. Janice took on extra hours on the front desk at the opticians and bought the waterproof suit second-hand, and in September Tina started.

Tina hated it.

She did not make a fuss. That was not her way. She went very quiet in the mornings and held the bus rail with both hands. At the gate she stood by the fire circle with her hands pulled up inside her sleeves while the others ran off shrieking into the trees, and she

stayed there, more or less, until home time. The wind in the branches frightened her. The mud frightened her. She would not touch a stick in case there was something on it. When the leader, a kind, weatherbeaten woman called Gail Hartigan, offered her a magnifying glass, Tina put her hands behind her back.

"She's just cold," Janice told her sister on the phone. "She'll get used to it."

She did not get used to it. By November she was crying in her sleep.

Janice did not tell anyone what she was thinking, because it seemed so foolish. But she felt as if she had bought her daughter a door into the whole living world, and Tina would not walk through it.

They lived on the ground floor of a block of six flats on the main road, and outside the front door there was a little bin store: a low brick wall, a strip of concrete and four wheelie bins. Nothing grew there except a dandelion in the corner that the council sprayed twice a year.

That was where the snail lived.

Janice did not notice it for weeks. She noticed only that Tina was slow getting in from the bus, and that she always stopped by the green bin and crouched there in her coat. "Come on," Janice would say, with the shopping. "It's freezing." And Tina would come.

One wet evening in December Janice went out with the recycling and found her daughter there in the dark, in her slippers, with a torch.

"What are you doing, love?"

"Checking," said Tina.

On the side of the green bin, just under the lid, was a snail. An ordinary garden snail, brown and stripy, about the size of a two-pence piece, with a little white chip on the edge of its shell.

"That's the Bin Snail," said Tina. "He comes out when it's raining. When it's dry he goes in there." She pointed the torch at the gap where the lid met the bin. "I give him lettuce. He likes the frilly bit. He doesn't like cucumber. He's got four feelers, two big ones

with his eyes on and two little ones for smelling, and if you touch them they go in, like this." She showed with her finger, not touching. "But you mustn't, really."

Janice stood there in the rain holding a box of empty tins. She had not heard Tina say so many words in a row since the summer.

"How long have you known him?"

Tina thought. "Since before forest," she said.

The next morning was bin day. Janice heard the lorry at the top of the road, and then she heard the front door bang, and from the window she watched Tina, in her pyjamas and wellies, run out to the bin store. The child who would not touch a stick in the woods reached up with her bare fingers, eased the snail off the plastic as if it might break, and carried it across the concrete in her cupped hands, talking to it all the way. She set it down on the brick wall, under the dandelion, and stood guard until the lorry had gone.

Janice rang Gail that afternoon. She had expected to feel ashamed. Instead Gail said, "Some children run into the woods. Some need the woods to come to them a bit at a time. Neither kind is wrong."

In January Tina went back to the nursery round the corner. Janice went back to her usual hours.

And on wet evenings, when the rain was slanting down past the street light, the two of them went out together with the torch and a lettuce leaf, and crouched by the green bin, and looked. Some nights the Bin Snail was there and some nights he wasn't. When he had been, they could always tell, because across the lid, in the torchlight, there ran a thin silver line, glittering, from one side to the other, like a road only he knew.

Sit with this: Where has a child already found the living world, in some place we have not thought to look?

48

Dad's Rain

Euan was five, and he lived on an island where it rained most days, and he had never been anywhere you could not see the sea.

Then he was ill, and the doctor on the island sent him on the ferry and then in an ambulance to the big children's hospital in the city, and there he stayed. Three weeks became five. His mum came with him and slept on a fold-out bed beside his. His dad had to stay at home, because of the boat and the creels and Euan's two big sisters, and because somebody had to.

The ward was on the sixth floor. From the window Euan could see a car park, a ring road and a great many roofs. The window did not open. The air inside smelled of hand gel and toast.

Euan did not complain much. He was a quiet child, and he was too poorly at first to mind. But as he got better, he got sadder. He stopped eating his toast. He would lie with his face towards the window and not answer.

"I want to go home," he said one night, and then, when his mum told him soon, he said, "It's not even raining here."

It was true. It was a dry, still autumn in the city, the kind people there were pleased about. On the island it had rained, his dad said on the phone, for nine days.

One of the nurses was called Sophia. She was from the islands too, a different one, further north, and she had a way of standing at the window with Euan when she did his checks, saying nothing, looking out.

"You know where the weather comes from, here?" she asked him one afternoon.

Euan shook his head.

"Out there." She pointed past the ring road, past the roofs, to the far edge of the sky, which was a dirty yellow-grey. "West. Most of our rain comes in off the sea. It goes over your island first. Then it comes here."

Euan thought about this. "Our rain?"

"Your rain," said Sophia. "It just takes a while to arrive."

That evening, when his dad rang, Euan asked him whether it was raining. His dad went to the door of the house to check. Euan could hear the wind in the phone, and the dog barking, and his dad saying, "It's coming in now, son. Big grey lot off the sea. I can't see the point."

The point was the headland at the end of the bay, with the lighthouse. Euan knew exactly what it looked like when you couldn't see it.

"Send it," said Euan.

His dad laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

After that, it was the game. Every evening his dad stood in the doorway and reported. Showers. Hail, briefly. A great black squall that had flattened the washing. Euan wrote it down, or his mum wrote it for him, in a notebook from the hospital shop. Then he watched the window.

Mostly nothing came. The city went on being dry and smug. But Sophia showed him on her phone how you could watch the rain on a map, green and yellow blobs drifting in from the ocean, and Euan would find the island and put his finger on it and then trace the line all the way to the city.

Then one morning, early, he woke because something was ticking against the glass.

It was still half dark. His mum was asleep on the fold-out bed. Outside, the car park was shining, and the roofs were shining, and the window was covered in fat drops that ran sideways in the wind.

Euan got out of bed in his hospital gown, trailing the little tube from his hand, and stood with his forehead against the glass.

Sophia found him there when she came on shift. She did not tell him to get back into bed straight away. She stood beside him for a minute, the two of them watching the water run down.

"That's been on our house," said Euan. "That's been on the boat."

"Probably," said Sophia.

"It's been on the dog."

"Very likely."

He put his hand flat on the window, where the drops were running down the other side. He kept it there until the glass grew warm under his palm, as if he could feel them.

He went home eleven days later. The ferry was late, because of the weather.

Sit with this: When a child is far from home, what might still pass between the place they have left and the place they are now? Who could help them see it?

49

Lime Grove

Judith was seven, and she walked to school with her dad every morning along the same street, past the same houses, at the same speed, which was too fast.

Her dad, Jerome, was a single dad with two jobs, and the mornings were a race. Teeth, shoes, bag, coat, the door that stuck, the walk, then the bus to work for him. He was good at it. He could do a plait in the dark. But Judith knew the walk to school the way you know the inside of your own mouth: without ever looking at it.

Then one Monday in the middle of June, Jerome sprained his ankle stepping off a kerb. Nothing serious, the nurse said, but he was to take it slowly for a fortnight. And so, for two weeks, they walked to school slowly.

The first morning was terrible. Judith was bored, and said so, every few steps. At the corner of the street she hopped from foot to foot and announced that she was going to be late and it would be his fault.

"Tell you what," said Jerome, leaning on the wall. "Shut your eyes."

"Why?"

"Just do it. Hold my sleeve. Tell me what you can smell."

Judith shut her eyes, mostly to make him stop talking.

"Cars," she said.

"What else?"

She sniffed. "Toast." Someone's kitchen window was open. "And bins. Yuck. And..." She frowned. "Wet. Like the floor at swimming."

Somebody had hosed their front path. Jerome had not noticed it either.

It became the thing they did, on the slow walks. A smelling walk. Judith would hold his sleeve and shut her eyes for ten steps at a time and call out what she found. The bakery, which smelled different on Tuesdays. Someone's washing powder, puffing out of a vent. Cut grass, from the little patch outside the dentist. A smell like coins, by the railings. And once, at the alley behind the chip shop, a sharp, sour, foxy smell that made her open her eyes and say "Ugh, what is that?" and Jerome said, "Fox, I think," and she spent the rest of the walk looking for one.

Then, towards the end of the second week, it was warm, and something new arrived.

It was sweet. Not like sweets. Heavier, and softer, like honey left in the sun. It was everywhere at once, all along the street, so that Judith turned her head from side to side trying to find where it was coming from.

"What's that one?"

Jerome sniffed. He did not know. He limped on, and Judith walked with her eyes shut, sniffing, until she bumped into something.

It was a tree.

There was a whole line of them along the pavement, one outside every third house, tall, with heart-shaped leaves. Judith had walked past them every school day of her life. Now she stood under one and looked up, and the whole tree was hung with little pale yellow-green flowers, in bunches, dangling.

And it was humming.

The sound was so loud, once you heard it, that she could not believe she had never heard it before. The whole tree was full of bees. Hundreds of them. Over the noise of the traffic, over the bus going past, the tree was buzzing like a fridge.

"Dad," said Judith. She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him under it. "Dad, listen."

Jerome listened, his bad ankle forgotten, his head tipped back like hers.

They were late for school that day. Neither of them minded much.

That evening, Judith asked him what the trees were called, and he looked it up on his phone, holding a photo of a leaf she had brought home in her pocket. They were limes. Not the fruit kind. A different tree, the kind whose flowers bees love above almost anything, the kind people used to plant along streets because of the smell.

"Lime trees," said Judith slowly.

She went and got her coat.

"Where are you going? It's nearly bath time."

"Just to the end," she said. "I want to check something."

He went with her, hobbling. At the end of the street, she stopped and pointed up at the sign on the wall, black letters on white, that she had passed every morning for three years.

LIME GROVE.

She stood looking at it, and then down the long green line of humming trees, with an expression on her face that Jerome kept afterwards, the way you keep a photograph: as if the street she lived on had just been introduced to her.

Sit with this: What is already all around the children you love, so familiar that none of you can see it any more?

50

The Rope

Every May the whole of Mrs Whitlock's class at the village school walked up to the bluebell wood. It was a tradition. The older children talked about it the way they talked about Christmas.

This year there was Tabitha.

Tabitha was six and had been blind since birth. She had a cane she called Stick and a laugh you could hear from the other end of the playground, and she knew her way round the school better than the supply teachers did. But the bluebell wood was a mile away up a narrow track, with tree roots and a stile, and the whole point of it, as everyone had always said, was to see the bluebells.

Mrs Whitlock thought about it carefully. She did not want Tabitha to feel left out. So she made a plan. The others would walk to the wood. Tabitha and the teaching assistant would stay behind, and the class would bring back a bunch of bluebells for her, picked from the edge, where it was allowed, so she could feel and smell them in the classroom. They could make something with them together when everyone got back.

She explained it at story time, gently.

Tabitha said "OK," in a small flat voice that was not like her at all.

It was Brian who put his hand up. Brian was the boy who always knew the answer and never put his hand up, because he was shy and did not like people turning round. He went red to the ears.

"But bluebells don't really look like anything when they're in a bunch," he said. "It's when there's millions. And you can't bring back the smell. The smell is the wood."

There was a silence.

"And the woodpecker," said someone else. "Last year there was a woodpecker. You can't bring that back in a bag."

Mrs Whitlock looked at the class. They were all looking at her. It would have been easy to explain about the track and the stile and the roots. It would also have been wrong, she realised, and not only because it was unkind. The walk belonged to the whole class, and Tabitha was as much a part of the class as anyone. Mrs Whitlock had known that, somewhere at the back of her mind. Brian had brought it to the front.

"Go on, then," she said. "How do we get Tabitha there?"

What followed took most of a week. They asked Tabitha first, which was Brian's idea, and Tabitha said the problem wasn't the

walking. She could walk. It was the not knowing what was coming. The visiting teacher who worked with Tabitha on her cane skills came out on the Tuesday and walked the track with Mrs Whitlock, root by root. Then someone remembered that the caretaker had a long rope in his shed, for tug of war on sports day. They borrowed it. In the playground, they practised: the whole class in a line, every child holding the rope with one hand, Tabitha in the middle. Whoever was at the front called back what was coming. "Root." "Step up." "Puddle, big one." "Stile in three, two, one."

They were very bad at it to begin with. The front kept forgetting to call. The back kept letting go. By Thursday they were good.

On the day, they walked up the track to the wood in one long line, holding the rope, and the line went at the speed of whoever needed it to go slowly, which was sometimes Tabitha and sometimes a boy who had a stitch and once, at the stile, Mrs Whitlock.

At the edge of the wood, before anybody could say anything, Tabitha stopped.

"Oh," she said. "It's cold." The air under the trees had changed. "And it smells green. And sort of..." She searched for the word. "Purple."

The others laughed, but not at her. Nobody had ever said it before, and now that she had, they all thought it did.

Mrs Whitlock had planned to read them a poem about bluebells at that point. She did not. Instead, somebody at the front of the rope said, "Everyone shut your eyes," and they all did, all twenty-six of them and the teacher too, standing in a line in the blue wood, holding a tug of war rope.

It was very quiet.

Then Tabitha said, "Something's knocking."

It was a woodpecker. Somewhere high up on the left, drumming on dead wood, so fast it sounded like a tiny machine. Last year's class had seen it only by chance. This year, twenty-six children with their eyes shut turned their faces the same way at once, and listened to it for a whole minute before it stopped.

They walked home holding the rope.

The next day the caretaker came to ask for it back. The class asked if they could keep it. He said they could borrow it until sports day. When sports day came, they lent it to him for the afternoon, and then hung it back up on two hooks along the classroom wall, where it stayed.

Sit with this: When we plan something for the children in our care, who might the plan quietly leave out? What might the children themselves suggest, if they were asked?

51

The Welly on the Ninth Floor

Norah lived on the ninth floor with her nan, and nothing grew there except mould round the bathroom window.

Her nan, who was called Nan by everybody on the walkway including the postman, had brought Norah home when she was a few months old, and had been bringing her up ever since. She had not planned on having a baby at fifty-nine. But there it was. Nan was not a person who spent a lot of time on what she had planned.

The flat had a front door that opened onto a long concrete walkway, open to the air on one side, with a rail at waist height and a view over the whole town to the hills. On a clear day you could see the gasworks, the football ground and the edge of the moor. Nan kept a chair out there, by the door, and on fine evenings she sat in it with a cup of tea while Norah, who was nearly three, rode her scooter up and down the walkway, ringing the bell.

In March, Norah's wellies split.

They were red, with frogs on, and she had worn them in every puddle in the town. Now the left one had a crack all down the side, and her sock came out of it wet. Nan took them off her on the walkway and said, "Well, that's the bin for those."

Norah screamed as if someone had taken her arm.

So the wellies did not go in the bin. They sat by the front door, side by side, for a week, while Nan tried to think of something.

What she thought of in the end was a magazine. It had come free with a packet of seeds stuck to the front, nasturtiums, and she had put it by for no reason. She looked at the packet, and then at the split welly.

"Come here, missy," she said. "We're making a garden."

They did it on the walkway. Nan poked holes in the bottom of the boot with a skewer, for drainage, she said, though Norah did not know what that was. They begged a carrier bag of soil from the man at the corner shop, who had a tub of geraniums outside. Norah filled the welly with a spoon, very slowly, getting most of it on the concrete. Then she pushed the seeds in with her finger: big, knobbly, like little brains.

"Now what?"

"Now we wait," said Nan.

Norah did not know how to wait. She checked the welly every time she went out of the door. She checked it in her pyjamas. She gave it water from her beaker, which was not really allowed. For nearly two weeks the soil sat there, brown, doing nothing, and Nan began to think she had promised too much.

Then a shoot came up, bent over like an old man, with its seed coat still stuck on top like a hat. And then round leaves, flat as plates, the size of a thumbnail, that held drops of water like little glass beads when it rained.

By June the welly had disappeared. Leaves spilled out of the top and down the sides and along the concrete, and among them were flowers, orange and yellow and a red so deep it looked dark. People on the walkway stopped to look. Mr Doyle from three doors down, who did not generally stop for anything, asked Nan what they were.

"Bit pointless, though," he said, leaning on the rail. "Up here. Nothing to come to them, is there? No bees at this height."

Nan said she supposed not.

Norah was sitting on the concrete beside the welly in her vest, eating a biscuit. She was not listening. She was watching a flower.

Something had landed on it.

It was a bumblebee. A big one, fat and furry, banded black and yellow with a white tail, bumbling and heavy, like a toy that had been wound up too tight. It had come up nine floors from somewhere, over the car park and the bins and the roofs, and found the one orange flower on the whole side of the building. It clung to the lip of the flower. Then it crawled right inside, so that only its back end was showing, and the whole flower shook.

Norah held her biscuit very still in the air.

"Nan," she whispered. "Nan, look. Him's in it."

Nan looked. Mr Doyle looked. The three of them watched, Mr Doyle with his mouth slightly open, until the bee backed out, dusty with pollen, and lifted off, and went sideways over the rail and away down into the town.

The next spring there were three wellies on the walkway, and a cracked washing-up bowl, and a teapot with no lid. One of them was Mr Doyle's.

Sit with this: What is lying about in your life, about to be thrown away, that might become a home for something living if you looked at it again?

52

Dandelion O'Clock

Ravi did the school pick-up on Tuesdays and Thursdays, because those were the days the bakery let him finish at two, and the way home from school went through the park.

In May the park was full of dandelions. Arjun was five, and he had recently learned from a boy called Harvey in his class that the fluffy ones were clocks. You blew, and you counted the puffs it took to get all the seeds off, and that was the time.

On the first Tuesday he picked one by the gate, filled his cheeks and blew.

"One. Two. Three. Four." He looked up. "It's four o'clock."

Ravi looked at his phone. It was twenty past three.

"It's twenty past three, beta."

Arjun looked at the bare stalk, then at the phone, with the face of someone who has been told the moon is a biscuit. "Your phone's wrong."

On Thursday the dandelion said seven o'clock. The phone said half past three. On the next Tuesday a dandelion by the swings took eleven puffs and a bit of help, and Arjun announced that it was nearly bedtime and they had better hurry, and he ran the whole way home in case the phone tried to argue.

Meena, at home with Anya, who was ten months old and eating a sock, said the boy had a point. In her experience the phone was wrong about bedtime nearly every day.

Ravi might have left it there. But the next Thursday, on the way to school in the morning, he noticed something he had walked past a hundred times without seeing. The grass by the park gate was thick with yellow dandelion flowers, wide open in the sun, like a carpet of little suns. And that evening, when he and Arjun walked back that way after tea to post a birthday card, the same flowers had shut. Every one of them. Folded up tight, like fists.

He stopped on the path.

"Arjun. Look at this."

Arjun looked. He crouched down and touched one. It was closed up hard, a green bud with a yellow tuft sticking out of the top.

"They're asleep," he said.

"They were awake this morning."

Arjun thought about this deeply. "So they know what time it is."

That evening, after Anya was down, Ravi looked it up on his phone, partly to prove a point. He came through to the front room and read it out. Nearly three hundred years ago, a famous Swedish botanist had noticed that different flowers opened and shut at different times of day, and he had drawn up a plan for a garden laid out like a clock face, where you could tell the hour by which flowers were open.

Meena put down her tea. Arjun, who was supposed to be asleep and was sitting on the stairs, said, very loudly, "*Told* you."

So the dandelion clock project began.

On school days they checked the flowers by the gate on the way there, and again at teatime whenever somebody could be persuaded out. Ravi bought a cheap notebook, and Arjun drew in it, because he could not write much yet: a yellow circle with spikes for open, a green fist for shut, and a cloud for days when it was raining and the flowers did not bother getting up at all. They found that daisies shut too, more slowly, pink round the edges. One stubborn dandelion behind the bins never quite closed. They named it Uncle.

Meena's mum came over from Leicester for the bank holiday and was taken straight to the park to be shown. She stood by the gate in her good cardigan and agreed that it was very clever of the flowers. Back home, she planted a row of daisies in a pot by her back door.

The fluffy ones went on being blown, of course. They were still clocks, as far as Arjun was concerned. They just kept a different sort of time. Ravi was informed that a dandelion clock could tell you how many minutes until tea, or how many sleeps until Saturday, or how much Anya loved you, and that his phone could do none of those things.

On the last Thursday before half-term, Ravi took the afternoon off and the whole family went to the park together, Anya in the pushchair with a rice cake. By the gate the yellow flowers were wide open, and among them stood the seed heads, grey and perfect.

Arjun picked one and gave it to his sister.

Anya held it in her fist and stared at it. Then she did what she had seen him do a hundred times. She took a huge breath, puffed out her cheeks, and blew a wet raspberry all over it. Two seeds came off. The rest stayed exactly where they were.

Arjun studied what was left with great care.

"Anya o'clock," he said, and lay down in the long grass beside the pushchair, laughing, while the seeds drifted off over the park in the afternoon sun.

Sit with this: What has a child near you insisted on lately that turned out to be a little bit true?

53

The Walking Kindergarten

A true story

In Denmark, in the early 1950s, there was a mother called Ella Flatau.

We do not know a great deal about her. The accounts that have come down to us are short, and it would be wrong to add to them. But what they tell is this. Near where she lived there was a forest. And Ella Flatau began to spend time there, regularly, with her own children and with the children of her neighbours.

That was how it began. A mother, a few children, and the woods close by.

Notice how ordinary that is. She was not a famous teacher. She did not, as far as anyone knows, set out with a theory or a plan. She did not found anything. She simply went into the woods with children, and then she went again, and then again. Not once, for a special day out, but as a habit. As part of the shape of their lives.

We can only imagine what those children met there. But anyone who has spent regular time in a wood with young children can guess at the kind of thing. The way a wood is different every week and different again in every season. Mud and leaf-litter and rain dripping off branches. Things to climb, and things to hide behind, and things that crawl. Time to be bored, and then, out of the boredom, to find something.

What the accounts do tell us is what happened next.

Other parents in the neighbourhood noticed. They noticed the children going out, and they noticed the children coming back. And they grew interested. They wanted the same for their own children.

So the parents came together. They formed a group and started an initiative to set up a kindergarten that would take place largely outdoors, in the woods. It is remembered now as the first forest kindergarten.

Nobody, at the time, could have known what would come of it.

The idea spread. First through Denmark, and then across Scandinavia. From there it travelled into Germany, and on beyond. It went from one wood to many, from a handful of neighbours' children to children in country after country.

Today there are forest kindergartens and outdoor early years settings in many countries. In Britain, the Forest School movement, which grew from the 1990s onwards, takes children into woodland for regular, long-term sessions. Those who practise it there hold that it should be frequent and regular, a long process carried out over time in a wood or other natural place, rather than a one-off visit.

Rather than a one-off visit. It is the same thing Ella Flatau did, all those years before. Not a trip. A habit. The woods as somewhere you go, again and again, until they are yours.

There is something in this story for every family, not only for those who live near a forest. It is a reminder of how large things can begin. Not with a policy or a programme or a building, but with one adult, a few children and whatever patch of the living world happens to be close by. And then the most important part, the part most of us leave out: going back. Next week, and the week after that, in sun and in drizzle, until the children know the place the way they know their own kitchen.

Ella Flatau did not bring the forest to the children. She brought the children to the forest, and kept on bringing them. Her neighbours simply saw what their children were becoming among the trees, and asked if they could come too.

Somewhere this morning, in Denmark or Germany or Britain or further afield, a small child in a waterproof suit is crouching over a beetle on a log, and an adult is crouching beside them. In a way, they are still following her.

Sit with this: Is there a patch of the living world near you that a child could come to know by going back, again and again? Who might want to come too?

54

The Wooden Spoon

Every frosty morning, before he left for work, Kenneth went out into the back garden in his dressing gown and wellies with a wooden spoon and broke the ice on the birdbath.

He had done it for years, long before Josephine. It was not much of a birdbath: an old terracotta saucer from under a plant pot, balanced on three bricks by the fence. But in winter, when everything was frozen, the birds came to it to drink. He liked to think of them finding it open.

He never explained this to anyone. Quentin, his husband, had asked once, the first winter they lived together, why he bothered, and Kenneth had shrugged and said, "They get thirsty," and gone back to his toast.

Josephine came to live with them when she was eighteen months old. She was three now, and in the mornings she sat on the kitchen worktop in her pyjamas, wrapped in a blanket, eating dry cereal out of the box while Quentin made the coffee, and watched through the window as her other dad went down the frosty garden with his spoon.

She watched him crack the ice. Tap, tap, then a harder knock, and a sound she could hear even through the glass, a flat crunch. She watched him lift out the broken plate of ice and stand it against the fence, where it would catch the light. She watched him tip in a bit of water from the kettle, not boiling, he said, just warm enough. Then he came back up the path, blowing on his fingers, and kissed the top of her head, and went to work.

He never asked her to come. He never told her what it was for.

That winter, she started standing up on the worktop to see better.

In February there was a hard frost, the hardest for years, and Kenneth woke with a fever and a cough like a fox barking and could not get out of bed. Quentin rang his work. Then he rang the doctor. Then he went upstairs with a mug of honey and lemon, and while he was up there, Josephine went missing.

It was only for about four minutes. But they were long minutes, the kind that put a new bolt high on the back door by teatime. Quentin came back down to an empty kitchen, a blanket on the floor, a chair pushed up against the drawers, and one drawer open.

The back door was open too.

He found her halfway down the garden. She had got her wellies on, the wrong feet, over her pyjamas. She had no coat. Her breath was coming out in clouds. And she was standing in front of the birdbath with a wooden spoon held in both fists, knocking at the ice.

Tap. Tap. Nothing happened. The ice was thick.

Quentin stopped on the path. He was going to scoop her up and carry her in. He very nearly did.

Instead, he went and stood beside her.

"It's very hard today," he said.

"Dad does it," said Josephine. She did not look round. Tap. Tap. She was frowning with concentration, her tongue out at the corner of her mouth.

"Do you want some help?"

She thought about it. Then she shook her head and hit the ice again, much harder, with the whole of her body behind it, the way she had seen through the window a hundred times.

It cracked.

She looked at the crack as if it had spoken. Then she hit it again, and it broke into three, and she put down the spoon and tried to lift a piece out with her bare hands, and gasped at the cold, and did it anyway. She stood it against the fence, where it would catch the light.

Quentin went and fetched the kettle, and Kenneth's dressing gown from the hook by the back door.

They stood there together afterwards, shivering, Josephine wrapped in her dad's dressing gown, which came down to the ground. And after a minute, a wren came down off the fence. A tiny brown bird, round as a ball, its tail stuck up straight. It hopped onto the rim of the saucer, looked at them both with one bright eye, and bent and drank.

Josephine held her breath.

Upstairs, Kenneth had dragged himself to the bedroom window at the sound of the back door. He stood there with his forehead against the cold glass and watched his daughter, in his dressing gown and her wrong wellies, watching the wren he had kept the water open for every winter of her life.

He did not tell her she had done well. When she came up later, red-cheeked, to tell him, he just said, "Thanks, love. They get thirsty."

"I know," said Josephine, and climbed onto the bed with her cold feet.

Sit with this: What do the children around you watch you do, day after day, without a word said about it?

Things you might try

Kneel down. The next time a child stops to look at something, a snail, a puddle, a weed in a crack, stop with them. Get down to their height if you can. Don't hurry them along and don't explain it. Just look together, and wonder out loud. "I wonder where it's going." "I wonder why it's that colour." You don't need to know the answers.

Count the sounds. Wherever you are, the bus, the park, the back step, try closing your eyes together for one minute and counting every sound you can hear. Compare numbers afterwards. Then go and find the ones you couldn't name. It works in the busiest city, perhaps best of all, and it costs nothing.

Go back to the same place. Choose one small patch of the living world near you: a tree on the way to school, a corner of the park, a window box, a stretch of beach, a car park crack. Visit it often, in every weather, and notice what has changed since last time. A child who knows one place well, through all its seasons, has learned something no single day out can teach. If there is a child who would usually be kindly arranged to stay behind, a child who cannot

see, a child who is frightened, a child without a garden, ask them first, and choose a place and a path that everyone can reach.

Let them see you care. Share something you love about the living world, from wherever you are. If you can't walk far, lie on the grass and name the clouds. If you love birds, name them as you go. If it troubles you to see litter, take a bag and pick some up. Don't make a speech. Children learn what we do far more than what we say, and they will come to it in their own time.

Your story

Think back to the first piece of the living world you ever called your own. A conker kept in a coat pocket until it went dull. A puddle you visited every morning. A tree whose bark you knew by heart. Who was beside you when you found it, and did they hurry you on or stop?

Or perhaps you have been the one crouched beside a child, watching them see something for the very first time. Stay with that moment a while. It is still teaching.



Show us who you are.

PART THREE

The Finding Years

Eight to fourteen

Somewhere around the age of eight, a child begins to look outward and ask, "What am I for? What am I good at? Where do I fit?" These are the finding years. The child is discovering how they think, what lights them up, how to belong to a group without losing themselves in it, and how to fall down and get up again. The grown-ups' work changes too. We are no longer only the gardeners; we become the ones who widen the door, who ask rather than tell, who share the decisions, and who show that a mistake is something to mend, not something to be ashamed of.

CHAPTER 7

So Many Ways of Knowing

Every child is clever in some language. Our part is to find out which one, and to listen in it.

On a slow train one wet afternoon, at a table seat by the window, sat a man and his daughter, who was about nine, still in her school sweatshirt, with a felt-tip mark on her chin. He had collected her from somewhere and they had a long way to go. As the train pulled out, he asked her the question every parent asks.

"How was school?"

"Fine."

He waited. She looked out of the window. The rain ran sideways across the glass. Anyone watching would have thought that was the end of it, and so, very likely, did she.

Then he tried again. "All right," he said. "If today was weather, what would it be?"

She turned from the window and looked at him properly for the first time. She thought about it, long enough for the train to pass through a station without stopping.

"Drizzle in the morning," she said. "Then sunny at break. Then fog. All through maths. Thick fog." She paused. "Then a bit of a rainbow at the end, because we did clay."

He nodded as though this were a perfectly ordinary report, which in a way it was. Then he asked what was foggy about the maths, and she told him, at length, and it turned out to be fractions, and it turned out she had been worrying about them for a week. By the time they got off, a few stops down the line, she had drawn the whole day on the steamed-up window with her finger: a cloud, a sun, a smudge, a curve.

Nothing clever had happened on that train. A question had been asked in a way that let one particular child answer. If you want to know how a child thinks, watch what they do when nobody is asking anything of them; and when you do ask, ask in a way they can answer.

This chapter opens the years from about eight to fourteen. They are the years when a child begins to stand a little apart from the family, and the years when many children quietly find out that what they are best at is not what the classroom measures first. Some are at home with words. Others come alive drawing, keeping a rhythm, moving, or making things with their hands. These are not different kinds of brain, and no child is only one of them. But each is a strength a child can stand on, and a way in.

Words and numbers matter, and every child deserves to be given them, with proper help when they come slowly. A child whose strength lies in pictures or in music is not a lesser child waiting to catch up. And I have come to believe that children of this age need, more than almost anything, to feel beauty and to feel their own strength, alongside all the explaining and reasoning they are asked to do.

So watch the margins of their homework. Listen to what they hum on the stairs. Notice what they take apart, and what they build out of the cardboard you meant to recycle. None of this is a distraction from their learning. Very often it is the heart of it.

And ask. One question I have come to love is a very simple one: *What makes you feel free?* Ask it in more than one way, and be ready for the answer to come back as a drawing, a tune, a model, or a long silence that is still thinking. You do not have to understand at once. You only have to keep the door open long enough.

The adults in these pages do not always find the door on purpose. Some find it by accident, some by stubbornness, and some simply by getting out of the way.

55

The Knot on the Rail

Hamish was nine, and he could tie a bowline behind his back with his eyes shut. He could not have read the word *bowline* if you had paid him.

At school he was still on the green books, with big print and a family with a dog in them, and most of his class had gone up two colours past him. When it was his turn to read aloud his ears went red, and the words did something he could not explain to anyone. The sounds would not stay fastened to the letters, and a long word came apart in his mouth before he could put it back together, so that he guessed, and guessed wrong.

What Hamish did instead of reading was tie knots.

He tied them in his shoelaces, in the cord of the kitchen blind, in the tassels of the sofa cushions. He had a length of old blue rope that lived in his coat pocket and came out on the bus and under the table at tea. His dad, who was at home that year with the baby while Hamish's mum did early shifts at the fish market, said that anyone who kidnapped Hamish would be trussed up by teatime.

On Saturday mornings, while his dad pushed the pram round the harbour to get the baby off to sleep, Hamish sat on the harbour wall and watched the boats come in and tie up. He watched the hands more than the boats.

An old man sat most mornings on the bench by the chandlery. Mr Merriman had fished out of the harbour for fifty years and now mostly watched other people do it. Hamish knew him the way you know people in a small town: to nod at.

One Saturday in October there was a short length of rope tied to the railing beside the harbour steps, with a knot in it Hamish had never seen. It was fat and round, like a little woven ball. Hanging from it on a bit of string was a brown luggage label, and on the label, in careful capitals, someone had written: MONKEY'S FIST.

Hamish looked at the knot for a long time. Then at the label. The M he could manage, and the K. The rest he worked out slowly, under his breath, until it sounded like something.

"Monkey's fist," he said out loud, and laughed, because it was a ridiculous name and exactly right.

Mr Merriman, on his bench, did not look up from his paper.

Hamish untied the knot to see how it went, which took him most of the morning, and tied it again, badly, and then less badly.

The next Saturday there was another rope on the rail, and another label. SHEEPSHANK. The Saturday after that: ROLLING HITCH. FOR WHEN THE PULL COMES FROM THE SIDE. That one took him ages, the second line especially, and he got *pull* wrong twice before he had it. But he wanted to know what the knot was for more than he minded the words.

By November the labels were getting longer. Mr Merriman wrote where he had learned each knot, and who from, and once, on the back of a label for a Turk's head, a few lines about a night, long ago, when a rolling hitch had kept the boat he was on off the rocks in a gale. Hamish read it twice on the wall with his finger under the words, then took it home and read it to his dad, who was trying to get mashed parsnip into the baby and stopped with the spoon in the air to listen.

Neither of them said anything about the fact that Hamish was reading. It seemed better not to. Mr Merriman never mentioned it either. When Hamish passed his bench he gave a small nod, and Hamish nodded back, and that was all.

At school Hamish was still on the green books. Then, one week, he was not. Mrs Tregear moved him up a colour, then another, and looked at him over her glasses as though he had done something slightly suspicious. She also asked for him to have a proper reading assessment, because a boy who could read about a gale off a luggage label but still swapped *was* and *saw* needed more than guesswork. By Easter he had been assessed, and there was a name for what the words did to him, and someone to sit beside him in tests and read the questions out.

In January Hamish invented a knot. It probably already existed somewhere under some other name, but he had made it up himself on the bus, and it held. On the Saturday he tied it to the rail by the steps. On a luggage label from the kitchen drawer he wrote its name, very large, in pencil, and a line underneath, which took him three goes and his dad's help with one spelling.

Then he went and sat on the harbour wall and did not watch.

When he came back past, Mr Merriman was standing at the rail holding the label at arm's length, the way old people read things, moving his lips.

The label said: THE HAMISH. FOR HOLDING ON WHEN IT GETS ROUGH.

Mr Merriman untied the knot, slowly, to see how it went. Then he tied it again, and got it wrong, and frowned, and untied it.

"You'll have to show me," he said. It was the most he had ever said to Hamish.

That spring there was a board in the chandlery window, with a row of knots on it on short lengths of rope and a brown label hanging under each one. Twelve were in old, careful capitals. The last was in a child's large leaning letters, spelt very nearly right.

Sit with this: What does the child you love keep coming back to when nobody is asking? What might you quietly leave where they will find it?

56

Look To

Louisa was twelve, and at school she did not speak.

At home she talked all the time. She argued with her stepdad Hector about whether cereal counted as soup, and sang in the shower loud enough to rattle the pipes. But the moment she walked through the school gate, something closed. The words were there. She could feel them, lined up behind her teeth. They simply would not come out. The word on her school file was selective mutism,

which made it sound as if she chose it. She did not choose it. She would have given anything not to have it.

She had moved to the market town eight months before, when her mum married Hector, who had a narrow house behind the church and a teenage son who lived mostly in his bedroom. Louisa had not said a word inside the school building since September. Her teachers were kind. They gave her cards to hold up and let her write her answers. A speech and language therapist came in every other week and sat with her in a small room with a box of games, which helped, slowly. But after a while most of them stopped asking her anything.

Hector rang the church bells. On Wednesday evenings he climbed the tower for practice night, and on Sundays he rang for the service. Louisa thought this was a very odd thing to do on purpose.

One Wednesday in January her mum was on a late shift and Hector's son was out, and Louisa was not going to stay in the house on her own with the wind doing what it did to the back door. So she went up the tower.

There were sixty-four steps in a stone spiral so tight she had to keep one hand on the wall. At the top was a small square room with whitewashed walls and old boards painted with dates, and six ropes hanging down through holes in the ceiling, each with a fat striped woollen grip on it. Hector called them sallies. Five people were standing about in coats. The tower captain, a woman called Hilary Fairweather, with short grey hair and a fleece covered in dog hair, looked at Louisa and said, "Are you ringing?"

Louisa shook her head.

"Shame," said Hilary. "We're one short. We're always one short." And then, quite cheerfully, "If you can hold a rope, you're welcome. If you can't, we'll teach you."

She did not ask Louisa her name or anything else. Hector told them. Nobody seemed to need Louisa to say a single word, because ringing, it turned out, was done in silence. You watched the ropes. You counted. You felt the weight of the bell high above you swing up and over and pull back down through your hands.

The next Wednesday, without anyone asking, she was waiting by the front door with her coat on before Hector had found his keys.

For weeks she learned on the bell with its clapper tied, so it swung without sounding, Hilary standing beside her with a hand hovering near the sally. Handstroke, backstroke. Catch, pull, let it rise. She was good at it. She had a feel for the rhythm, and she counted under her breath without moving her lips. By March she was ringing rounds with the others, her bell sounding out over the rooftops on a Wednesday evening, and nobody in the town below knew which one was hers.

There was one thing in ringing that was spoken. Before the bells began, whoever rang the treble, the lightest bell, the first, called out to the others: "Look to." Then, "Treble's going." Then, "She's gone," and pulled, and the rest followed.

One Wednesday in April, Hilary moved Louisa onto the treble. She did not say why. She took her own place on the tenor and stood with her rope in her hands, waiting.

The others waited too.

Louisa held the sally. Up above, six bells hung balanced mouth upwards. Hector looked at the floor. Nobody said it for her. Nobody even looked at her. They just stood there, the way they stood every week, as if this were an ordinary pause and there was all the time in the world.

"Look to," said Louisa.

It came out as hardly more than a whisper. Nobody moved.

"Treble's going." A little louder.

"She's gone."

She pulled. And the treble swung over and spoke, and the second came in behind it, and the third, and all six were ringing down onto the town in their right order, because she had said so.

It did not make school any easier. The next morning she walked through the gate and the words closed up behind her teeth as they always had. It would be another long while before she said anything at school, and when she did, it was one word, to one teacher, in an empty corridor.

But on Sunday mornings that summer, people crossing the market square with their papers heard the bells start up and did not look round. They had no idea that a girl of twelve, in a whitewashed room at the top of sixty-four steps, had told them when to begin.

Sit with this: Where could a child you know take part without first having to be good at it? What might they find they can say there?

57

The Bakestone

Fergus's nan died in March, when he was eleven, and in April he came to live with his Aunt Belinda in a flat on the ninth floor of a tower block in the city.

He brought two bags of clothes, a shoebox of nobody knew what, and his nan's bakestone. It was a round iron griddle, black with years of use, so heavy that Belinda had to carry it up from the car in both arms while the lift was broken. Fergus would not leave it behind. She did not understand why, and she did not argue.

Nan had brought Fergus up since he was three. Belinda was Nan's youngest. She worked long hours for the council, had lived on her own for twenty years, and could cook, as she put it, toast and panic. She loved Fergus. She had no idea at all what to do with him.

He did not talk about Nan. Not to Belinda, not to his new form tutor, not to the bereavement nurse who came round twice with leaflets. He said he was all right. When Belinda tried, carefully, at tea, to say something about his nan, he looked at his plate until she stopped.

What he did do was make Welsh cakes.

The first Saturday, Belinda came home from the shops to find the kitchen full of smoke and Fergus standing at the cooker with the bakestone on the big ring, turning small round cakes with his fingers. He had no recipe. He was doing it from memory, from watching. Flour, butter, sugar, currants, an egg, and spice from a jar in Belinda's

cupboard that was eight years out of date. The first batch came off black on the outside and raw in the middle. He threw them in the bin without a word and started again.

He made them every Saturday after that. Sometimes on Sundays too. The flat began to smell of hot butter and nutmeg. When Belinda came into the kitchen he stopped, and stood with his back to her, until she went out again. So she learned to stand in the hallway instead, out of sight, and listen to the scrape of the palette knife and the tick of the iron as it heated.

They got better. She could tell from the smell.

In June, Belinda was organising a small gathering at the chapel Nan had gone to for sixty years, on what would have been her eightieth birthday. Tea in the vestry, the old ladies from the Wednesday group, a few neighbours. She had wondered for weeks whether to ask Fergus to say something, or read something. She knew he would not.

One evening she stood in the kitchen doorway, and this time she did not go away.

"Fergus," she said. "For Nan's birthday tea. Would you make the Welsh cakes? Nobody ever made them like she did."

He kept his back to her while two more cakes came off the iron.

"I'll think about it," he said.

A week later he gave her a shopping list. It was in his best handwriting, and it said *proper butter, not the spready one*, underlined twice.

On the Saturday of the tea he got up at six. By the time Belinda came into the kitchen there were nine dozen Welsh cakes cooling on plates and chopping boards and a baking tray balanced across the sink. He had sugared every one of them by hand.

At the chapel he did not speak to anybody. He stood by the urn, holding a stack of paper napkins nobody needed, while the old ladies came for their tea. One of them, very small and very old, took a bite, and stopped, and put her hand flat against her chest.

"Oh," she said. "That's your nan's, that is." And she sat down quite suddenly on a stacking chair and cried, and ate the rest of it while she cried.

Fergus went red, and went outside, and stood for a while by the railings.

Afterwards Nan still did not come up, and Belinda did not push.

But the next Saturday she was in the hallway as usual, listening to the bakestone tick, and Fergus said, without turning round, "You can come in if you want."

She came in. He moved along the counter and pushed the mixing bowl towards her.

"Cold hands," he said. "Nan said you need cold hands, for the butter. Run them under the tap."

She ran them under the tap. He showed her how to rub the butter into the flour with just her fingertips, lifting it, letting it fall, until it looked like breadcrumbs. He showed her how thick to roll it, and how to tell when the iron was hot enough by flicking water at it, and how Nan had turned them with her fingers instead of the knife. Belinda burnt her fingers on the first one. He showed her again.

Her first batch came off black on the outside and raw in the middle. They ate them anyway, standing at the counter with flour on both their hands, while the bakestone ticked and ticked as it cooled.

Sit with this: Is there a child near you who is saying something in a language that isn't words?

58

The Dewdrop on the Paddy

A true story

In 1931, in Bengal, a woman called Suprova Debi took her son on a visit to Santiniketan. The boy was about ten years old, and his name was Manik.

Santiniketan was the school that the poet Rabindranath Tagore had founded thirty years earlier. It was not like other schools. Many of its classes were held outdoors, under the trees, and music, dance, painting and crafts stood side by side with reading and arithmetic. Tagore himself was an old man by then.

Suprova Debi and her son had come for the poet's blessing.

We are not told much about what the boy felt, standing in front of such a man. It is easy enough to imagine. What we are told is what he did. He had brought his autograph book with him, the way children did then, and still do, and he held it out to the old poet to sign.

Tagore did not sign it there and then.

It would have taken him a moment. An old man asked for his signature by a child he did not know could have written his name and handed the book straight back, and nobody would have thought any less of him. Instead he took the book home with him.

The next day the boy went to Tagore's house to collect it.

When he opened it, there was the signature. And beside it was a short poem, written for him.

Put simply in English, its closing lines say that the poet had gone far from home to see mountains and oceans, and yet had never truly seen what lay just two steps from his own door: a drop of dew on a sheaf of paddy.

A paddy is a rice field. The poet had travelled the world, and he was telling the boy that he had missed, all along, the small bright thing close at hand: a single drop of dew resting on a stalk of rice. It is a strange thing, in a way, to give a ten-year-old. Not praise, not advice, not a rule. A way of looking.

Years later, at nineteen, the boy went back to Santiniketan, this time to study art there himself.

He grew up to be Satyajit Ray, one of the great film-makers of the twentieth century.

People who love his films often speak of what is in them. Ordinary lives. Small rooms. Rain falling on a pond. A child watching a train go by across a field of tall grass. They are films that

take their time looking, without hurry, at the things most of us walk straight past on our way to somewhere more important.

Nobody can say that a poem in an autograph book made a man into an artist. That would be claiming far too much, and a life is made of a thousand things. Even the year of the visit is sometimes given differently in different accounts. But the attention that poem named, the habit of seeing what is two steps from your own door, became the attention of a whole lifetime's work.

What stays with me is not the fame of either of them. It is the night between the two days. An old man, with a great deal else to do, sitting at home with a child's autograph book, deciding that a boy's small request deserved a proper answer. Not a signature only, but a day's thought. Something the boy could keep.

Children ask us for small things all the time. Will you watch this? Will you sign this? Will you look at what I made? Most of the time we answer quickly, and that is all right. We are busy, and life is full. But now and then a small request, taken seriously and answered fully, turns out to be the door through which a whole life walks.

The boy came for a signature. He went home with a dewdrop.

> *Sit with this:* When a child asks you for something small, what might it look like to answer it fully, just once? What would you want them to notice two steps from their own door?

59

Two Names on the Cart

Every August the hill town held a soapbox derby, straight down the steep high street from the war memorial to the bridge, with straw bales on the corners and half the county lining the pavements. And every August, for three years running, Glenn and Benedict had entered it separately, and lost to each other in different ways.

Glenn was fourteen and did everything properly. He lived with his dad, Norman, and his grandad, Gregory, in a tidy house with a tidy garage, and he had the top mark in Design Technology for his

year. His carts were built from drawings. Every measurement was checked twice and written in a notebook. His cart the summer before had been beautiful, varnished and true, and had rolled down the high street with great dignity and come seventh.

Benedict was fourteen and had never drawn a plan in his life. He lived with his mum above the bookmaker's and built things out of whatever was in the skip behind the hardware shop. His ideas were wild and quick and often brilliant, and his things often fell apart. His cart the summer before had been the fastest thing anyone had seen on that hill, and had lost its front wheel on the bend by the chemist's and finished in a straw bale, upside down, to great applause.

In school they worked at benches on different sides of the DT room, as far apart as possible. Glenn thought Benedict was a bodger. Benedict thought Glenn was a bore. They were both, a little, right.

That spring the derby committee changed the rules. Entries under sixteen would be in teams of two: one to steer, one to push off. Nobody asked Glenn, because everyone knew he would rather work alone. Nobody asked Benedict, because everyone knew his carts crashed. And so, in the end, at the bottom of the entry list with no partner, there were two names left.

It was Norman who suggested it, over the fence, to Benedict's mum, who had come to collect a parcel. She laughed. Then she said, "Why not?"

Neither boy could think of a good enough reason why not, which was annoying for both of them.

They built it in Glenn's garage, on Saturday mornings, and for the first month they mostly argued. Glenn wanted to draw everything first. Benedict wanted to start cutting. Glenn measured the chassis three times and Benedict sighed so loudly that Gregory came out from the kitchen to see whether someone was ill.

Then, in the third week, Benedict turned up with a pair of wheels off an old racing wheelchair that he had rescued from the skip, with good sealed bearings and thin hard tyres.

"They won't fit," said Glenn.

"Not yet," said Benedict.

Glenn spun one of the wheels, listened to the bearing, and spun it again. Then he got out his notebook, and drew a new front axle around them, carefully, to the millimetre. It took him a whole evening. They fitted.

After that something shifted, slowly, in both directions. Glenn showed Benedict how to brace a joint so it would not shake loose on a bend, and why it mattered, and Benedict, who had lost a wheel on that bend in front of half the county, listened harder than he had ever listened in a lesson. Benedict talked Glenn into trying a steering idea made from bicycle brake cables, which nobody had ever seen on a soapbox and which Glenn was sure would not work. It worked. Glenn was so surprised he wrote it down.

By July, Benedict had started drawing before he cut. Only rough sketches, on the backs of envelopes, but drawings. And Glenn had started saying, "Let's just try it and see," which made Norman, in the kitchen, put his mug down and look at Gregory.

On derby day it was hot, and the high street smelled of chips and cut straw. Glenn steered, because he had the steadier hands. Benedict pushed off from the memorial with a run that nearly took him over the handlebars after it. The cart went down the hill faster than anything Glenn had ever built and straighter than anything Benedict had ever built. It held the bend by the chemist's. It held the bend by the bank. It crossed the line under the banner, fourth, with Glenn white-knuckled and grinning.

They did not win. Neither of them seemed to mind, and neither of them could have said who would have won if they had raced each other instead.

The cart lived in Glenn's garage for the rest of the summer, and people stopped on the pavement to look at it through the open door. On its side, in the space where an entrant's name is meant to go, there were two. One was neatly stencilled in black. The other had been painted freehand in orange, very large, and ran slightly downhill.

Sit with this: Who might a child you know learn from, if nobody were keeping score?

60

The Ferry Band

Nicola's granny lived in the next croft along, close enough to wave to from the kitchen window, on an island so far north that in June the sky never got properly dark.

Granny knitted. She had always knitted. She knitted the way other people breathed, in the evenings by the stove, at the bus stop, in the waiting room at the surgery, the needles going without her seeming to look at them. She knitted the old patterns of the islands, bands of crosses and diamonds and stars in brown and cream and blue and a red like rowan berries. The patterns had come from her own mother, and from hers, and they were kept in a biscuit tin on the dresser: charts drawn on squared paper, soft at the edges, some of them so old the pencil had gone silver.

Nicola was eight, and she thought knitting was the most boring thing in the world.

What Nicola did was build. She had a game on her mum's old tablet where you made whole worlds out of little coloured squares, block by block, and she spent every minute she was allowed on it, and quite a few she was not. She built castles and lighthouses and a full-size copy of the island ferry, with the cars inside it. She built the croft, and Granny's croft next door, and the sheep.

Granny called the tablet "that thing" and said it would turn Nicola's eyes square.

On the dark winter afternoons after school, while Nicola's mum and dad were at work at the salmon farm, the two of them sat at either end of Granny's kitchen table, the needles clicking at one end and the tablet tapping at the other, and neither of them looked up.

Then, one afternoon in February, Granny stopped knitting.

She had got up to fetch another ball of wool and stopped behind Nicola's chair, looking down at the screen. Nicola had been building a puffin, a big one, on a cliff she had made, square by square. Granny put her glasses on and looked, and went on looking.

"How did you get the curve of its back?" she said. "Show me."

Nicola was so surprised she showed her. How you chose a colour. How you placed each square. How a curve was really only steps, if you stood back far enough. Granny watched, her needles idle in her lap. Then she went to the dresser, and got down the biscuit tin, and laid one of the old charts on the table beside the tablet.

It was a grid. Squares, some coloured in and some left blank. A row of tiny stars.

Nicola looked at the chart. Then at her puffin. Then at the chart again.

"It's the same," she said.

"It's the same," said Granny.

They spent the rest of that winter at the kitchen table with squared paper and a packet of felt tips. Granny explained the rules of the old patterns: that you only ever used two colours in a row, that the pattern had to repeat so it would fit round a body, that the long strands at the back could not be too long or they would catch on your fingers. Nicola wanted to put a ferry in. Granny said ferries were not traditional. Nicola said they were traditional now, because the ferry came every day. Granny opened her mouth, and shut it again.

The ferry took a long time. It had to be small enough to fit in a band thirteen squares high and still look like a ferry, with a funnel and a wake behind it. Nicola built it in the game first, then drew it on the paper. Granny crossed bits out. Nicola put them back. They argued about the colour of the sea. In the end Nicola chose a blue that was not in any of the old patterns, a bright one, the exact blue of the water in her game.

"That's not a real colour," said Granny.

"It is in the summer," said Nicola. And Granny looked out of the window at the sound, which in February was the grey of a pan lid, and remembered that it was.

The jumper took Granny until the end of April. It was for Nicola's grandad, who worked the ferry ramp in the mornings. It had the old crosses at the cuffs and the old stars at the neck, done the way they had always been done. And right across the chest, in a band

of bright blue, there was a row of tiny ferries, one after another, all the way round, sailing.

Grandad wore it on the ramp the first cold morning in May. People in cars looked at it and smiled. A man from the south took a photograph.

The pattern went back into the tin on the dresser that evening. It lay on top of the others, on fresh white paper, in felt tip, with Granny's small neat pencil notes in the margins and, in the bottom corner, in large careful capitals, a signature: NICOLA.

Sit with this: What does your family always do the same way? If a child added something of their own to it, what might it be?

61

The Yard in Chalk

Linda was ten, and she had been in Year 5 at Brook Lane Primary for six weeks without saying a word.

She had come from a village in the hills of northern Portugal at the end of the summer, when her mum and dad found work at the food-packing plant outside town. At home, her mum said through the school's interpreter, Linda never stopped talking. At school she sat very straight at the end of the front table and watched everything.

Her teacher, Mrs Ackroyd, had been teaching for twenty-two years and had never had a child arrive with no English. She made picture cards and laminated them. Every morning she knelt by Linda's chair with the cards in her hand.

"Pencil," she said, pointing. "Can you say pencil, Linda?"

Linda looked at the pencil. She looked at Mrs Ackroyd. She did not say pencil.

By the fifth week, when Linda saw the cards coming, she put her hands in her lap. At playtime she stood by the drainpipe near the kitchen door, with her coat zipped up to her chin, and watched the others the way you might watch the weather in another country.

On a Thursday after school Mrs Ackroyd went to a training session, where a woman who had worked with newly arrived children for thirty years told them that many go quiet for weeks, even months, in a new language. They are listening the whole time, she said. Pushing for the words can send them further back.

"So stop asking them to say things," she said. "Ask them something instead."

On the Friday, the cards stayed in the drawer. At morning break Mrs Ackroyd went out to the drainpipe with her phone and the tub of playground chalk from the PE cupboard. She typed slowly into the translation app and held out the screen.

What do you miss most?

Linda read it. She took the phone, and her thumbs went quick and sure over the screen. She handed it back.

My grandmother's yard.

Mrs Ackroyd held out the tub of chalk. She pointed at the playground, at the wide stretch of tarmac by the back fence where nobody played because the ball always went over. Then she pointed at Linda, and waited.

Linda looked at the chalk. Then she took a white stick, walked out to the fence and knelt down.

She drew a wall first, a long square wall as big as the classroom. Then a gate, on the side nearest the school. She came back for brown and green and drew a tree in one corner, with broad leaves like open hands and small purple fruit. A round stone thing with a little roof over it. A row of hens with careful feet. A cat asleep on the wall. A door, a bench beside it, and a washing line full of sheets.

The bell went. She did not get up.

Children drifted over. A boy from her table called Fred crouched down at the gate and pointed at the tree.

"What's that?"

Linda looked up at him. Then, very quietly, she said, "Figueira."

It was the first word anyone at Brook Lane had heard her say.

"Fig what?" said Fred.

"Figueira." A little louder. She touched the purple fruit. "Figo."

The round thing was the well, *poço*. The hens were *galinhas*, and she made a small clucking noise that set three children laughing, and then she laughed too, behind her hand. Last of all she drew a figure on the bench, in a dark dress and a headscarf, with her hands in her lap, and above it, in careful capitals, she wrote AVÓ.

"That's her nan," Fred told everyone, with great authority.

Mrs Ackroyd let them stay another ten minutes, and then asked the caretaker, Mr Varley, not to sweep that corner. He grumbled, and put a cone at each end of the wall.

For the next fortnight, at every break, the class stood at the chalk gate and Linda, from inside her grandmother's yard, taught them. Fred learned *gato*. Linda added a lemon tree and a dog with one ear up. A new sheet went up on the classroom wall where the cards had been: *figueira, poço, galinha, gato, avó*, with the English underneath in Linda's small upright writing, copied from a list Mrs Ackroyd had given her.

On the second Monday, when Mrs Ackroyd got to the end of the register, she paused, and said carefully, the way she had practised in the car, "Bom dia, Linda."

Linda looked at her. The whole class looked at Linda.

"Bom dia," said Linda. Then, because her teacher's had come out like a name for a dog, she said it again, slowly, so Mrs Ackroyd could hear where the sound went. Mrs Ackroyd tried again. Linda shook her head. They did it four times while the class held its breath, until Linda nodded.

By then the yard by the fence had been walked over by a great many feet, and the fig tree was almost gone. At break Linda knelt down and drew it in again, darker than before, and underneath it, for the others, she wrote *fig tree*.

Sit with this: What does a child near you know that they cannot yet put into the words around them? How might they show it?

62

Running the Line

Sonny was twelve, and every Sunday morning his dad shouted at him from the touchline.

Des would not have called it shouting. He called it encouragement. At seventeen he had been in the academy at a professional rugby league club, with a contract as good as on the table, until a tackle in a reserve match did for his knee. He still walked with a slight roll on cold mornings. He coached nobody, and he would have told you he was not one of those dads. But from the moment the under-13s kicked off on the club's pitch behind the gasworks, his voice carried to every corner of the field.

"Go low, Sonny. Low. Get your hands on it. Sonny. *Sonny.*"

Sonny played on the wing, where the ball came least. He was quick and light, and he could tackle when he had to. But when he heard his dad, something in him folded up small, and he spent most matches half a step from where the play was, hoping it would not come his way.

There was one part of Sunday he loved. The under-8s played first, and someone had to help the referee, Mr Brierley, a retired PE teacher with a whistle on a cord round his neck. It was always Sonny who put his hand up. He ran the touchline with the old yellow flag, and he came alive. He knew where the ball had gone out before it landed. He knew the laws better than half the coaches. When a seven-year-old burst into tears over a play-the-ball, it was Sonny who crouched down and showed him, very patiently, how to roll the ball back with his foot.

Des saw all this and did not think much of it. That was not rugby. That was standing on the edge of it.

One Sunday in March, Mr Brierley found Des at the tea hatch.

"Your lad's got the best eyes in this club," he said. "He reads it. He sees what's coming two tackles before it comes. The county has a scheme for young match officials. He could start with me on the mini games now, and do the proper course when he's old enough."

"He's a player," said Des.

Mr Brierley stirred his tea. "Have you asked him?"

Des had not. In the car on the way home, with the heater roaring and the windscreen steaming up, he asked, a bit stiffly, as though it were a question on a form.

Sonny went very still.

"Can I?" he said. It was a voice Des had not heard from him since he was small.

Des thought about the contract that never came, and the knee, and all the years he had spent picturing his son running out at a stadium with the floodlights on. He kept his eyes on the road.

"If that's what you want," he said, and did not feel good about it at all.

The next Sunday Sonny ran the line for the under-9s with Mr Brierley, in a black shirt two sizes too big. Des stood on the far side of the pitch with his arms folded. For the first time in years he had nobody to shout at. So he watched.

In the car afterwards, Sonny talked the whole way home.

"Did you see their number nine? He kept creeping up off the line every play-the-ball. Every single time. Mr Brierley gave him two warnings and then pinged him on the third."

Des had not seen it. He had been watching the ball.

"Watch the markers' feet," said Sonny. "Not the ball. The feet tell you everything."

The following week Des watched the feet. And something odd happened. The game he had played for ten years opened out in front of him as though he were looking down on it from above: the defensive line, and the gaps forming in it before the ball arrived, and the one lad who was always a yard slow back into position. He had played it with his body. His son read it like a page.

He began to ask Sonny questions in the car. Why did the ref let that go? How did you know it was forward? Sonny answered at length, and sometimes drew it on the back of a petrol receipt, and twice they had to pull into a lay-by to finish an argument about obstruction.

Late in the season, at an under-10s match, a dad on the touchline next to Des began bellowing at the far side, where Sonny had his flag up for a ball in touch.

"Open your eyes, lad. That never went out."

Des, whose voice had once reached every corner of that field, said quietly, "It did, you know. Left foot on the whitewash. Watch the feet."

The other man looked at him and closed his mouth.

On the far touchline Sonny stood with the yellow flag held straight up, perfectly still, waiting for the whistle. And on the near one, his dad kept his hands in his pockets and watched the feet.

Sit with this: Is there a child near you who comes alive somewhere you were not looking?

63

Hold On All the Way Down

Jake was thirteen, and angry most of the time.

His mum, Lesley, had multiple sclerosis. Some weeks she was nearly herself. Other weeks her legs would not do what she told them, and Jake did the shopping and the washing and got his little sister Paula to school, and then sat in maths and could not remember a word anyone had said. He did not tell anyone at school about home. He thought it was nobody's business. What he did instead was lose his temper.

By March he had been in three fights. The last one had been in the dinner queue, over nothing, and the other boy had needed his lip stitched. Jake was one more incident away from being excluded, and he knew it, and knowing it made him angrier.

Carol, who came to the house every few weeks to see how Jake and Paula were managing, suggested the judo club at the leisure centre. She also asked, and Jake grudgingly agreed, if she could tell his head of year what his mornings were like, so that school would stop seeing only the fights. Lesley was doubtful about the judo.

Wasn't that just teaching him to throw people about? But she was tired, and out of ideas, and in the end she said yes.

The club met on Tuesday and Friday evenings upstairs at the leisure centre, on blue mats that smelled of feet and disinfectant. The coach was a small woman in her sixties called Jean Nuttall, with grey hair cut short and a black belt gone frayed and pale at the edges. She came up to about Jake's shoulder.

On his first night she sat him on the edge of the mat and told him the club's only rule.

"When you throw someone, you hold on," she said. "You keep hold of their sleeve all the way down, so they land safe. Every throw. Every time. And nobody here throws anybody until they've learned to be thrown."

"That's soft," said Jake. He had come to throw people.

"Breakfalls," said Jean, as if he had not spoken. "Over there, with the little ones."

So all through the spring term, Jake learned to fall. Backwards, sideways, forwards over his own shoulder. He slapped the mat until his palms stung. And he was thrown, over and over, by whoever Jean paired him with, including, to his deep humiliation, a nine-year-old girl in plaits who threw him perfectly and held his sleeve all the way down, so that he landed on his back looking at the ceiling with nothing hurt but his pride.

Every session he asked when he could start throwing. Every session Jean said, "When you can fall," and turned away to someone else.

When he lost his temper on the mat, which he did twice, she sent him to the bench by the wall until he was ready, and when he came back she paired him with someone as if nothing had happened. Every Tuesday and Friday she said, "Evening, Jake," as he came in, exactly as she had the first time.

He went back anyway, twice a week, with his kit in a carrier bag, and told his mum it was boring.

The week after Easter she let him throw.

He was paired with a lad called Murray, older and heavier, who had a habit of shoving on the mat. Jake was ready for it. When Murray shoved, Jake turned in, the way he had watched the others do a hundred times, and loaded Murray onto his hip, and threw him. For a second it felt like everything he had wanted for months.

And halfway through it, without deciding to, Jake held on.

He kept his grip on Murray's sleeve all the way down, and pulled up a little at the end, the way the girl in plaits had done for him, so that Murray's head did not touch the mat. Murray landed flat, with a slap, and lay there, winded and fine.

Jean, across the room, saw it, and went back to what she was doing.

Over the next year Jake got good. His temper did not vanish, but it got slower, and there started to be a moment in it, a little gap, in which he could decide what to do. The fights at school stopped. At home, his mum's legs went on doing as they pleased, and no amount of judo was going to change that.

One evening in the winter, Lesley stood up too fast from the kitchen table and her legs went from under her. Jake was across the kitchen before he had thought about it. He caught her arm at the elbow and kept hold all the way down, and lowered her onto the lino as gently as anything, so that her head never touched the floor.

She sat there for a moment, breathing, looking up at him.

"Where did you learn that?" she said.

Now, on Friday evenings, Jake helps Jean with the beginners, eight- and nine-year-olds mostly, a few of them with fists already clenched when they walk in. He kneels on the blue mats beside them while they learn to fall. And when at last they are allowed to throw, he crouches by their partners' heads and says the same thing every time.

"Hold on. All the way down."

Sit with this: When a child's anger has a reason behind it, what helps it find somewhere to go? Who taught you what strength was for?

Things you might try

Ask the question more than one way. Choose a simple question, the kind the dad on the train asked: *If today was weather, what would it be? What makes you feel free? What was the best bit of today?* Then let the child answer however they like: in words, a drawing, a tune, something built from what's in the recycling, or a few moves in the kitchen. Wait for the answer, even if it takes a day to arrive. You may be surprised which children turn out to have the most to say.

Notice what they do when nobody asks. For one week, watch what a child you love does in their free moments: what they doodle, hum, take apart or make. Don't comment on it or correct it. At the end of the week, set something down beside it, the way Mr Merriman tied a new knot to the harbour rail each Saturday. A library book, an old tool, a second-hand keyboard, an evening in a bell tower where nobody auditions. Then leave it there and see what happens. And notice what they carry. A child who is tired, quick-tempered or far away in class may be doing a grown-up's share at home, as Jake was. Ask gently how things are, and make sure the people at school know, so that they see the whole child and not only the trouble.

Invite them into what the family already does. If there is a song, a recipe, a dance, a story or a skill that has been handed down in your family, ask the children what they would add to it, not only how to keep it the same. A row of ferries in an old knitting pattern, a new verse, a different colour in the old design. A tradition stays alive when the young are allowed to give it a heartbeat of their own.

Ask before you arrange. When you are planning something carefully on a child's behalf, a club, a lesson, a way of settling in, stop and ask them first what they would choose. If they have no words for it yet, in English or any other language, hand them a stick of chalk or a pencil and see what they do with it. Their answer may not be the one you hoped for, especially if it was once your own dream. Take that seriously, step back a pace, and watch what they love the way they see it. Not every asking needs words.

Your story

Think back to a place where you were good at something before anyone told you so. A shed, a kitchen table, a riverbank, the back row of a choir. Did anyone notice? Perhaps nobody did, and you carried it for years. Or perhaps someone set something down beside you, a tool, a book, a length of rope, and let you get on with it. Stay there a moment, and then think of a child near you now, and what they might be good at that nobody has asked about.

CHAPTER 8

A Real Say

A fence a child has helped to build is one they will keep.

A mother and her boy of about eleven are setting off on a long drive north. Before she has even started the engine, she does something that is easy to miss. She takes the road atlas and the printed directions out of the glovebox and hands them to him.

"You get us there," she says.

He follows the route slowly, reading the little numbers on the page, and when the first big junction comes up he checks the directions again, twice, as if the road might have changed while he was looking. At every roundabout he calls the exit before his mother can ask. She takes it, every time, without checking, and the boy keeps his finger on the page and sits up straighter.

An hour later, at the services, he wants to go in for the teas on his own. You can see her think about it.

"Yes," she says. "It's just through those doors. Straight there, straight back. If you come out and can't see the car, you stay by the doors until I come for you. All right?"

"All right."

He comes back ten minutes later carrying two teas in a cardboard tray, with the concentration of someone defusing a bomb. He spills a little on the way and looks stricken. She says, "That's the bit the car park had," and he laughs, and gets in, and anyone watching would swear he is taller than when he left.

Nothing happens in that car that anyone would call an event. But a child has been given a real share of the day, and a limit to go with it, in the same breath, and you can see what the two together do to him.

Somewhere between eight and fourteen, children start to watch how things are run. You may have noticed it at your own table. The question is no longer only "Can I?" but "Why not?" and "Who decided that?" and, the one that stings a little, "That's not fair." They notice who gets asked and who gets told. They notice which rules the grown-ups keep and which apply only to children. Quite often they are right.

It can look like defiance. Usually it is something better: a young person wanting a hand in how their world works.

None of this means handing children every decision. Some decisions belong to the adults, and saying so honestly is part of the care. But between "you decide everything" and "you decide nothing" there is a great deal of room, and most of the good things happen there: a real job rather than a pretend one, a genuine vote, a say in a rule before it is made, an honest reason for a rule that cannot be shared.

There are two easy mistakes, and most of us make both at different times. One is to arrange the whole world for our children and hand it to them finished. It comes from love, but a child who is never given a real share tends to learn either to obey without understanding or to rebel without direction. The other is to leave children to find every limit on their own, as if freedom meant nobody minding.

The way between takes patience. Share what can be shared. Explain what cannot. Hold the limit with love, and let the child see you holding it. A boundary that has been explained can one day be carried by the child alone.

It is not always comfortable. A real share means letting a child call the wrong exit now and then, and finding the next one together rather than taking the map back. It also means saying plainly, and without apology, when something is not theirs to decide, and why. Children can usually tell the difference between a limit and a lock.

64

The Table on Ward Four

On the children's ward at the city hospital, tea came at five o'clock on a metal trolley that rattled down the corridor like a train. Every child ate in bed. The tray table was wheeled across, the lid came off the plate, and the curtain was pulled half round, and then everybody ate alone, looking at the television on the wall or at nothing.

Lydia was twelve, and she had been on Ward Four for four weeks after the operation on her hip. She had learned a great deal about it. She knew which nurse did the best impression of the consultant. She knew that the machine in the playroom gave out two hot chocolates if you pressed the button twice quickly. And she knew that teatime was the worst part of the day.

It was the time the parents went home. They went to collect brothers and sisters from school, or to feed the dog, or to sleep for a few hours in a proper bed, and the ward went quiet in a way it never was at any other time. Lydia heard the little boy in the next bay crying most evenings at about ten past five. She cried herself, once or twice, behind her curtain, with her mouth full of shepherd's pie.

One afternoon the play specialist, Maggie Garland, gave her a notebook to keep her busy. Lydia used it to ask questions.

She went round the ward on her crutches, bed by bed, and asked anyone well enough to answer. "What do you miss most from home?"

"My dog," said a girl of six.

"My own bed. This one crackles."

But the answer that came back again and again, in different words, was about tea. "Eating with my brothers." "Our kitchen." "The noise." "My mum shouting at my dad for having his phone at the table." A boy called Shane, who was thirteen and had been in and out of the ward all his life, said, "Just sitting with people. That's all."

Lydia took the notebook to Sister Gallagher, who ran the ward and was not to be argued with. Lydia had a plan written underneath

the answers. Everybody who could get out of bed should eat together, at the big table in the playroom, at five o'clock.

Sister Gallagher read it standing up at the nurses' station, twice. Then she said, "It's a good idea, and I can't just say yes to it."

She explained why, and she did not make it short. Some children were on drips and could not be moved. Some were not allowed to eat at all before operations. And two of the children on the ward, Shane and a girl down the corridor, had cystic fibrosis, which meant they must never sit close to each other, because they could pass on germs that were harmless to everyone else and dangerous to them.

"So," said Sister Gallagher, "if you want this, you'll have to work it out with the people who know all that. Are you up for it?"

It took ten days. Lydia sat in on a meeting with the dietitian, a nurse whose whole job was germs, and Maggie. Some of her ideas did not survive. The big table could not be for everyone. In the end they settled on tea in the playroom on Tuesdays and Fridays to start with, for whoever was allowed. Shane would have his own small table by the window at one end of the room, and the girl down the corridor would come on the evenings he did not, so that the two of them were never in the room together. The children who were not allowed to eat could still come and choose the music. Lydia drew up a rota for laying the table and stuck it on the playroom door with a plaster.

The first Tuesday there were seven of them. It was not peaceful. Somebody knocked over a jug of water. Somebody's mum came back early and stood in the doorway with her coat still on and did not come in, because she did not want to spoil it. Shane, at his window table, told a joke about the consultant that made the girl of six laugh so much she got hiccups.

Nobody cried at ten past five.

By the end of the month it was every night. The night staff had started saving the chairs.

On Lydia's last evening, a new boy arrived, eight years old, with his arm in plaster and a face like thunder. His name was Albert. At

five o'clock, when the trolley came rattling down the corridor, Lydia took him by his good sleeve and walked him to the playroom.

"Forks are in the second drawer," she said. "You do the forks."

Sit with this: Is there a place your children share that they might change, if someone asked them first?

65

The Number on the Front of the Bus

Billy was ten and lived with his nan in the flat above the launderette on Market Street. It was warm in winter because of the dryers underneath, and it always smelled faintly of clean washing. He had lived there since he was four.

That autumn, his nan started getting things wrong.

She put salt in her tea instead of sugar and drank half of it before she noticed. She held the post right up against her nose. At the bus stop on Thursdays, when they went to the market in the next town, she would peer down the road and say, "Is that our one coming, Billy? I've left my glasses on the side," when her glasses were on her face.

Nobody told him anything. When he asked, she said her eyes were "being a nuisance" and changed the subject. But he heard her on the phone in the kitchen with the door pushed to, saying words like "clinic" and "the back of the eye", and he lay in bed at night with the warmth of the dryers coming up through the floor and worked it out for himself. What he worked out was that his nan was going blind, and that when she was blind somebody would come and take him away to live somewhere else.

He stopped eating breakfast. He started walking home from school very fast, to check she was all right.

It was Mrs Holloway from the launderette who said something. She had known them both for years. She caught his nan on the stairs one evening, Billy said later, and he heard every word through the door.

"He knows, love," said Mrs Holloway. "He knows something's wrong, and he's frightened half to death because you're pretending it isn't."

That Saturday his nan made toast and sat him down at the little table by the window.

She told him plainly. She had a condition called macular degeneration. It meant the middle of her sight was going, so that faces and words and numbers were blurred, though she could still see round the edges. It would probably get worse slowly. If it ever changed all of a sudden, she was to go straight to the eye clinic that same day; the doctor had made her promise. It would not make her ill. A woman from the council was coming on Wednesday to show her how to manage the cooker and the kettle. She had told his teacher, too, so that school knew.

"And I'm not going anywhere," she said. "And neither are you. Have you got that?"

Billy nodded. Then he said, very quickly, that he could do the cooking, and the post, and the shopping, all of it.

"No," said his nan. "You can't, and you won't. The bills are mine, and the doctors are mine, and the worrying's mine. That's my job." She pushed the toast towards him. "But I'll tell you what I can't do any more. I can't read the number on the front of the bus."

So Thursdays became his.

On Thursdays, in the holidays and after school when the late market was on, Billy read the buses. He stood at the stop with his nan's arm through his and called out the numbers as soon as they came round the corner. Then, at the market, he read her the prices on the stalls, and the labels on the tins, and the little cards in the window of the pet shop advertising kittens, which she did not need to know about but liked hearing anyway.

On the bus, he found, he could ask things. With the town going past the window and the bags of shopping round their feet, he asked her what it looked like, what she saw when she looked at him. Whether it hurt. Whether it would happen to him.

"It looks like someone's put a thumbprint on the middle of everything," she said. "No, it doesn't hurt. And no, you've got your grandad's eyes, and he could see a rabbit at a mile."

The woman from the council came on the Wednesday and stuck little orange bumps on the cooker dial, so his nan could feel where the settings were. Billy watched her set the oven with her eyes shut, frowning, her finger on the bumps. She did it wrong twice, and then right. After that she did it right every time.

He started eating breakfast again. He did not stop walking home quickly, but he stopped running.

In the spring the bus company changed the timetable, and the market bus became the number nine instead of the fourteen. His nan never learned the new number. She did not need to.

Billy saw it first every Thursday, coming round the corner by the chip shop, long before it reached the stop.

"Nine," he said, and his nan got her pass out, and held it ready for him to show the driver, though the driver knew them both by then and waved them on.

Sit with this: When something hard is happening at home, what is your child filling the silence with? What is one small, true part they could carry, and what will you keep for yourself?

66

The Lorries at Night

Flora's grandad had driven lorries for forty years, mostly at night. He had driven to the docks and back, to Scotland and back. When Flora was small she sat on his knee in his bungalow and he told her the names of the towns he had driven through, like a list of sweets.

Then, the winter Flora was eight, he fell in his kitchen and lay on the floor until the morning, and after that he started to get muddled. He forgot whether he had eaten. He put the kettle in the fridge. After a long talk with his GP and a social worker, the family decided he

could not live on his own any more. With carers coming in during the day, he would come to live with them, in the village, in the house on the main road.

The decision about where he would sleep was made in the kitchen, after Flora had gone to bed. Her mum was there, and her stepdad, and her stepbrother Francis, who was thirteen and was included because the plan meant moving the family computer out of his way. Flora was not asked. She was eight, it would only upset her, and there would be time to explain once everything was settled.

She heard most of it anyway, sitting on the third stair in her pyjamas.

The plan was sensible. Grandad would have the little study at the back, which looked out over the garden. It was the quietest room in the house. It was as far as you could get from the main road, where the lorries went past all night on their way to the coast. Everyone agreed that quiet was what an old man needed.

Flora sat on the stair with her knees under her chin and knew that it was wrong. She did not know how to say so.

She knew something none of them knew, because none of them had stayed at Grandad's bungalow as often as she had. Grandad did not sleep at night. He never had. Forty years of driving through the dark had taught his body that night was for being awake. When Flora stayed, she would wake at two or three in the morning and find him in his chair at the front window in his dressing gown, with the lamp off, watching the road. She would climb up beside him with a blanket, and he would tell her about each lorry that went by. "That's a fridge," he would say. "Going to the docks. He'll be there by four." And the muddle would go out of his voice.

Grandad came for a trial weekend in March. They made up the study with his own quilt and his photographs and put a night light by the bed.

At two o'clock on the Sunday morning, Flora's mum woke to a noise downstairs and found the back door open and her father standing in the garden in the dark, in his slippers, frightened and saying he did not know where he was.

She brought him in. He would not go back to the study. He was shaking. She did not know what to do.

Then she heard Flora's voice from the front room.

Flora was already there. She had heard him, too. She had pulled the armchair round to face the window and put a blanket on it, and she had opened the curtains, and the orange light from the main road was coming in across the carpet.

"Bring him in here, Mum," she said. "He likes to see them."

Her mum brought him in. He sat down. A lorry went past, and then another, its lights sweeping across the ceiling.

"That's a car transporter," said Grandad, after a while. "Empty. Going back for more."

His hands stopped shaking. Flora climbed onto the arm of the chair. Her mum sat down on the sofa and listened, through three more lorries and a milk tanker.

"How did you know?" she said at last.

"I always sit with him," said Flora. "At his house. You never asked."

The plan changed the next morning. The grown-ups did the changing, the measuring and the phone calls; that part was theirs. A little alarm went on the back door that chimed upstairs whenever it opened. But the front room became Grandad's room, with his chair by the window and the curtains left open. The television went into the study at the back.

Grandad did not get better; that was never going to happen. Some days he did not know who any of them were. But he slept in the afternoons now, and in the night he sat at his window and watched the road, and he was not frightened.

On the windowsill there is a notebook. In it, in Flora's handwriting and sometimes in his, are the lorries. *Tuesday. 2.10. Fridge. Docks. Wednesday. 3.45. Car transporter. Empty.* Flora reads them back to him in the mornings before school, and he nods, as if she were reading him the names of towns.

Sit with this: Is there a decision coming in your family that will touch a child? What might they have seen, from where they stand, that nobody else has?

67

Nobody Names a Goal

The under-tens played on Saturday mornings on the rec behind the sea wall, where the wind came straight off the water and took the ball wherever it liked. They were not a good team. They had lost eleven matches out of fourteen, and one of the draws had been because the other side's minibus broke down.

For three seasons they had been coached by a man called Mr Haines, who knew a great deal about football and believed in going over what had gone wrong. After every match the team stood in a huddle in the drizzle while he went through the goals they had let in, one by one. The children learned to do it too. By the spring, when a goal went in, half the team turned round and looked at the goalkeeper.

The goalkeeper was Ivor. He was nine, and big for his age, and he had stopped diving. He just stood in the middle of the goal with his arms by his sides and let the ball go where it was going, because if he dived and missed it was worse.

Then Mr Haines moved to Spain, and nobody else would do it, so the team was taken over by Stephen's dad.

Stephen's dad did the accounts for three garages from the box room at home, so he could fit his hours round anything. He did the school run, made very good flapjack and knew, by his own cheerful admission, almost nothing about football. He had played rugby at school, badly. He turned up to his first training session with a whistle still in its packet.

At the end of his first match, which they lost five–one, the children gathered round him in the wind, waiting for the list of goals.

He did not have one. He had not really followed the goals. So he asked the only question he could think of.

"Right," he said. "Who did something for the team today that nobody would have noticed?"

There was a long silence. Somebody's mum, on the touchline, put her flask down.

"There are two rules," said Stephen's dad, making them up as he went. "You can't name yourself. And nobody names a goal. Goals get noticed anyway."

The first week, nobody said anything except Stephen, who named his best friend Clive for lending him a shin pad. The second week, three people named their best friends. Stephen's dad wrote the names on the back of the team sheet and read them out again at the start of training on Tuesday.

By the fourth week, the children had started watching for it during the matches. You could see it. Somebody would do something small, chase back when the game was lost, pick a smaller player up out of the mud, and two or three others would glance at each other as if to say, *Did you see that?*

It was a girl on the left wing who first named Ivor.

"Ivor shouts where everyone should stand," she said. "When they've got a corner. He tells us who to mark. Nobody else can see the whole pitch."

Everyone looked at Ivor. Ivor went red to the ears and looked at his boots.

"He told me my laces were undone," said Clive. "Before the second half. Otherwise I'd have fallen over."

It went on the back of the team sheet. So did Ivor's name the next week, and the week after that, because once they were looking, the children found that their goalkeeper was doing things for them all the time. He was the one who noticed when someone was limping. He was the one who remembered whose turn it was to take the oranges. He talked, the whole match, from his goal, and they had never once listened.

The team still had rules. Shin pads on, no swearing, everyone shakes hands at the end, even when the other side has been horrible. They still lost most Saturdays. Stephen's dad still did not understand offside, and the children explained it to him, patiently, about once a month.

But they had stopped turning round to look at the goalkeeper.

In April, in a match against a team from up the coast, a shot came in low towards the far post, and Ivor dived for it. He did not save it. He got one finger to it, and it went in off the post, and he lay in the mud with the wind blowing his shirt up.

Nobody looked at him. The left winger ran back and pulled him up by the arm, and Clive shouted, "Unlucky, Ivor," and the game went on.

In the huddle afterwards, Ivor put his hand up before anyone else.

"Clive," he said. "He ran back for the ball when we were losing four–nil. Every single time."

Stephen's dad wrote it down on the back of the team sheet, in the wind, holding the paper flat against his knee.

> *Sit with this:* What might the children around you start to see in each other if you asked a different question at the end of the day?

68

The Doctor Who Brought Himself Before the Court

A true story

In 1912, in Warsaw, a doctor called Janusz Korczak opened an orphanage. It was called the Dom Sierot, and it stood at 92 Krochmalna Street. He ran it with his colleague, Stefania Wilczyńska.

In the Dom Sierot, the children governed a great deal of their own life.

There was a children's parliament, and it decided on holidays and important events in the life of the house. There was a duty system, in which the children themselves did the cleaning and the kitchen work, and in which helping the weaker children was itself a duty, shared out like any other. There was a newspaper, written by and for the children.

And there was a court.

Its judges were children. There were five of them, chosen from among the children of the house by lottery, so that anyone might sit in judgement and anyone might be judged. An adult served the court only as its secretary, gathering what people had to say, but with no vote. The court heard the cases that any group of children living together will produce: bullying, laughing at another child, telling tales. Its rulings followed a written code, and at the centre of that code stood forgiveness. If anyone disagreed with a judgement, they could ask for it to be looked at again after a month.

Consider what that meant. The child who had been laughed at could bring the child who laughed before a court of their equals. The child who had done wrong would be judged not by a tired adult at the end of a long day, but by other children who knew exactly what it was like to live in that house, under a code that began with forgiveness.

It would be easy to imagine that a court like that was a sort of game, something the adults allowed to make the children feel grown-up while the real decisions were taken elsewhere. It was not.

The adults were not above it.

More than once, Korczak brought himself before the children's court, for his own failings. He was the director of the house. He was a doctor and a grown man, and he stood before five children chosen by lot and answered for what he had done.

We do not need to invent what was said in that room to understand what it meant. A house in which the strongest stand above the rules teaches children one lesson only: that power wins. A house in which the strongest person chooses to be bound by the same law as everyone else teaches something quite different. It

teaches that the rules belong to all of them. It teaches that respect runs in both directions. And it teaches, without a single lecture, that the children's judgement matters, because a grown man has put himself into their hands.

Korczak believed that a child is entitled to be taken seriously. He meant now, not later. He meant that a child is already a person, with a right to respect today, not someone who will become a person once they are grown.

The rest of the story is very hard to tell, and it should be told plainly. In 1942, Janusz Korczak, Stefania Wilczyńska and the children of the orphanage were murdered at Treblinka.

Korczak's insistence that a child is already a person, with a right to be taken seriously now, outlived them all, and it has shaped the way the world thinks about the rights of children ever since.

When we give a child a vote at the dinner table, or a place on a school council, or a say in the rules of a club, we are standing, whether we know it or not, somewhere near 92 Krochmalna Street. And when we, the adults, are willing to be held to the rules we ask our children to keep, we are standing beside the doctor who brought himself before the court.

> *Sit with this:* Is there a rule in your home that the children keep and the adults do not? What would it be like to keep it too, for a week?

69

The Rules on the Shed Door

When Dora's grandad died in the winter, the allotment committee wrote to say that plot twenty-three could pass to the family if they wanted it. Her mum read the letter at the kitchen table and cried, and then said yes.

Dora was eleven and her brother Barnaby was eight. They had spent most Saturdays of their lives on that plot, eating peas straight out of the pod and being told not to tread on things. Now it was

theirs, and the first time they went down in March, it looked enormous and muddy and very empty.

Inside the shed door, held on with four rusty drawing pins, was a card. It said RULES OF THE PLOT across the top in their grandad's square capitals, and underneath was a list. Some of the lines were in his handwriting. Some, near the top, were in older, faded ink, in a hand none of them recognised.

Shut the gate behind you.

Leave the tap as you found it.

Never dig when it's wet.

Don't plant out till the oak's in leaf.

Share the glut.

No flowers. They don't feed anybody.

Dora read it twice and pulled a face.

"That last one's stupid," she said. "I want flowers. I want sunflowers all along the back. And a pond. And a hammock." She looked at the card again. "We should just take it down and do it our way."

Her mum looked at the shed for a long moment.

"All right," she said. "It's yours and Barnaby's as much as mine. But not like that. Before anything comes down, you read every rule, and for each one you decide whether to keep it, change it or let it go. And you find out why it's there first."

"How are we meant to find out why?"

Her mum nodded over the hedge, to plot twenty-two, where an old man in a flat cap was sitting on a bench with a thermos.

"Ask Mr Gedge," she said. "He's been coming here since he was a boy, same as your grandad."

So they did. It took most of the spring.

Mr Gedge turned out to know the reason for nearly everything. You shut the gate because of the rabbits, and once, in 1987, a goat. You never dug in the wet because it squashed the soil and nothing would grow in it for a year. You waited for the oak because the oak knew when the last frost was better than any forecast. Dora wrote it

all down in a school exercise book, with a column for *keep*, *change* and *let go*.

The gate, the tap, the wet and the oak, they kept. *Share the glut* they kept as well, after Mr Gedge told them about the summer their grandad grew so many courgettes that he left them on doorsteps all down the street at night, like a burglar in reverse.

The flowers took the longest.

"Ah," said Mr Gedge, when they asked. "That one's your great-grandad's. Wartime, my dad always said. Every row had to feed somebody then. You'd have been shamed for a sweet pea." He drank his tea. "Mind you, your grandad grew sweet peas every year of his life. Behind the shed, where the committee couldn't see. For your nan."

Dora went behind the shed. There was nothing there now but nettles and a stack of old pots. But when she looked closely at the fence, she found little loops of green garden twine, rotted and faded, tied at every post, all the way along, where something had once been trained to climb.

They changed the rule. It became *Flowers, for whoever needs them.*

It was when they took the card down to copy out the new version that they found the last rule.

It was on the back. It was written in pencil, very faint, in the large uneven letters of a child, and underneath it were their grandad's initials and the number nine.

Give the first strawberys to the littlest.

Dora stood in the doorway of the shed, holding the card in both hands. Barnaby read it over her shoulder, slowly, moving his lips.

"He spelt strawberries wrong," he said.

"He was nine," said Dora.

That evening, at the kitchen table, she wrote out the new rules in her best handwriting on a fresh card, the kept ones and the changed one. At the bottom, she copied out the last rule exactly as it was. She did not correct the spelling.

They pinned the new card on the front of the shed door. The old one went on the inside, where it had always been, with the pencil side facing out.

The sunflowers went in along the back in May, after the oak was in leaf. So did a row of sweet peas behind the shed, on new twine, tied to the old posts.

In June, Dora found the first strawberry. It was small and lopsided and not entirely red. She called across the plot.

Barnaby came running, and stood very straight in front of her, because he knew the rule. He ate it in one bite.

"Is there a rule," he said, with his mouth full, "about the second one?"

Sit with this: Which rules in your home were handed down without anyone asking whether they still fit? Is there one a child might choose to keep exactly as it is, spelling and all?

70

You Take Me

Amanda was thirteen, and her dad lived in the city, an hour and ten minutes away by train with a change at the big station in the middle. Every other weekend her mum took her: sat with her on the train, walked her across the big station to the second platform, handed her over to her dad like a parcel, then went home on her own and came back for her on Sunday.

In the autumn Amanda asked if she could go on her own.

Her mum said no.

Amanda said that a girl in her class went to her dad's on her own on the coach, and that was further. Her mum said she did not care what a girl in her class did. Amanda said she was not a baby. Her mum said she had never said she was. Amanda said, "You treat me like one," and went to her room, and turned her music up just loud enough to make the point.

It went on for weeks. It came up in the car and over tea and once, terribly, in the queue at the supermarket. By November they were hardly talking to each other at all. Her mum was talking to a teenager who wanted too much too soon, and Amanda was talking to a woman whose only word was no.

It was the Thursday before a weekend at her dad's when her mum came and sat on the end of her bed.

"Saturday," she said. "You take me."

Amanda took her headphones off. "What?"

"You do it all. Tickets, platforms, the change, everything. I'll be a passenger. I won't say a word, and I won't help, unless you ask me."

On Saturday morning, Amanda bought the tickets from the machine at their little station, and got them wrong, and had to queue at the window to change them, while her mum stood a few feet away, holding the strap of her bag with both hands. Her face was perfectly calm. Amanda could see her jaw was not.

At the big station, everything happened at once. The train was late. The platform for the city train had been changed and was flashing on the board, and there were people everywhere, and a voice over the loudspeaker that nobody could understand. Amanda stood under the departures board with her heart going and read it, line by line, and found the train, and found the platform, and walked. Her mum followed.

They got on with three minutes to spare. Amanda sat down by the window and found that her hands were shaking. Her mum sat opposite and looked out of the window and kept her promise.

It was on the way home, on Sunday, that her mum talked.

"Do you want to know what frightens me?" she said. "It isn't you. You were better at that station than I am. It's that if something goes wrong in the middle of it, I'm an hour away, and there's nothing I can do. That's all it is. That's the whole thing."

Amanda looked at her.

"So what would make it all right?" said her mum.

They worked it out on the train, on the back of the ticket envelope. Amanda would text from the big station when she got off

the first train, and again when she was on the second one. If a train was cancelled or she got lost, she would not wander about looking; she would go to the information desk under the clock and stay there, and ring. Her dad would meet her on the platform at the city end, not outside. She would never accept a lift from anybody, however nice they seemed. And for the first month, as a sort of joke that was also not a joke, she would send her mum a photo of the departures board.

The first Saturday, the photo arrived at 10.14. *On it. Platform 6.* Her mum, standing in her kitchen in her coat, read it nine times.

In January, Amanda's phone ran out of battery between the first train and the second, and the second was cancelled because of ice. She did exactly what the envelope said. She went to the desk under the clock, and asked the man there if she could use his phone, and rang her mum, and then her dad, and waited. Her dad came and fetched her in the car. Her mum, when she rang, was quiet for a moment and then said, "You did it right," in a voice that was trying hard to be ordinary.

By the spring nobody asked for photos any more. Amanda sent them anyway, out of habit, and then because she liked to.

Her mum has never deleted them. They are all still on her phone, a long row of departure boards, Saturday after Saturday, the same yellow letters on black, with the platform numbers changing, and in the corner of some of them, reflected faintly in the glass, a girl in a red coat holding up her phone.

Sit with this: When you say no to a young person, what do you think they hear? What would it take for you to let them take you, once?

71

The First Night Box

There was a sheet of paper on the fridge in the Fairbairns' house, held on by a magnet shaped like a lighthouse. It said WELCOME TO OUR HOUSE at the top, and underneath there was a list. *Bedtime is nine on school nights. No food upstairs. Ask before using the washing machine. We knock before we come into your room, and we ask you to knock before you come into ours.*

Mr and Mrs Fairbairn were foster carers, and had been for eleven years. At the moment they had two children living with them. Harold was twelve and had been there for three years. Christine was eleven and had been there for two. The house was a tall, narrow terrace in the city, with a cat, a creaky staircase and a boiler that banged.

One evening in October Mrs Fairbairn told them at tea that a new boy would be coming at the weekend. He was ten. His name was Lawrence. He would probably arrive late, with his social worker, and he would probably be frightened.

"You two know this house better than anyone who's ever arrived in it," she said. "I'd like you to help me get it ready. Properly. Whatever you think he needs."

Christine went to the fridge and read the sheet out loud. Then she put it down on the table.

"That's not a welcome," she said. "That's just rules."

Mrs Fairbairn looked at it as if she had never seen it before. She had written it herself, years ago. "Go on," she said.

Harold was quiet. He was thinking about his own first night.

He had arrived at half past ten with a bin bag. Somebody had shown him his room and said goodnight, and then he had lain in the dark for hours needing the toilet and not going, because he could not find the light switch in the bathroom and did not dare ask. At six in the morning the boiler had banged like someone kicking a door, and he had sat up in bed with his heart going, sure that somebody was coming.

"Nobody tells you anything," he said. "Not the actual things."

So the two of them made a list of the actual things. It took two evenings and quite a lot of arguing about what counted. Mrs Fairbairn sat with them and said yes or no to each one. Most were yes. One took a long discussion. Christine wanted *You can have toast whenever you're hungry, even in the night.* Mrs Fairbairn thought about the knives and the grill and said it could be toast in the toaster, and you told someone in the morning. Christine agreed. Harold wrote it down.

When they had finished, the sheet said this:

THINGS NOBODY TELLS YOU.

The bathroom light is a string. It's on the left. Pull it.

The boiler bangs at six in the morning. It's only the boiler.

The fourth stair creaks. Nobody minds.

You can have toast in the night if you're hungry. Tell someone in the morning.

You don't have to talk to anyone until you want to.

Mr Fairbairn's jokes are bad. You don't have to laugh.

They kept the old rules too, on the other side. Christine said some of them were fair.

Then they made a box. It was a shoebox, which Christine covered in wrapping paper left over from Christmas. In it they put a torch, because Harold said you should always be able to see. A new toothbrush, still in its packet. A pair of socks. A bar of chocolate. And the sheet of things nobody tells you, folded in half.

Lawrence arrived on the Saturday at quarter to eleven at night. He had a sports bag and a carrier bag and a face that was not going to give anything away to anybody. He did not take his coat off, and he kept his answers to yes and no.

Mrs Fairbairn took him up. Harold was on the landing in his pyjamas, which was not allowed after nine, and nobody said so.

He did not say hello. He just opened the bathroom door, reached in, and pulled the string, so that the light came on.

"It's on the left," he said. Then he went back to bed.

At about two in the morning, Harold heard the fourth stair creak. Then, after a while, very quietly, the toaster.

In the morning there was a plate in the sink with crumbs on it, and on the kitchen table, in pencil, on the back of an envelope, it said *Had toast.*

Lawrence stayed for a long time. He talked eventually, a little and then a lot, mostly about football and a programme about sharks.

The following spring, when another child was coming, Mrs Fairbairn got out the sheet of things nobody tells you, and the three of them sat round the table to see if anything needed adding. Lawrence took the pen and thought for a while.

Then, at the bottom, he wrote: *The cat sleeps on whoever is saddest. Let her.*

Sit with this: What do the children in your house know about arriving, or about being new, that the adults have forgotten?

72

The Little Stack

Every July, when the hay came in, the children from the village came up to the farm.

They came on bikes and on foot along the lane, and some of them helped and most of them did not, and nobody minded, because the hay was in and the weather had held and there was squash and cake on the back of the trailer at four o'clock. The bales went into the big open barn at the top of the yard, stacked higher and higher, until by the end of the week the stack went nearly to the roof.

And the children climbed it. They always had.

Louise was fourteen, and it was her family's farm. She had grown up climbing the stack, and she knew how. She knew you never jumped across a gap, because the bales could shift, and a whole side of a stack could slip and come down. She knew you came down facing in, like a ladder, never facing out. She knew which bales were tied loose. The children from the village did not know any of this, and every summer her dad shouted at them from the tractor to get

off the stack, and every summer they got off until he had driven away.

The summer before, a boy from the village had fallen through a gap between two bales and broken his ankle. Her dad had put up a sign on the barn: NO CLIMBING. It lasted until the first wet afternoon, when someone used it as a sledge.

This summer, on the second day, Louise was carrying a bucket across the yard when she looked up and saw Olive.

Olive was eight, and lived in the end cottage on the lane. She was at the very top of the stack, right up under the tin roof, and she was not moving. She had climbed up after the bigger children and they had all gone back down the other side, laughing, and she was sitting on the highest bale with her knees drawn up and her face white, because she had looked down.

Louise dropped the bucket and shouted for her dad. He came running from the workshop and stood at the foot of the stack, talking to Olive in his calmest voice, while Louise climbed up the way she had been taught. It took a while. When she got to the top she did not say anything about being stupid or dangerous. She said, "Turn round. Face the bales. Put your foot where my hand is." And she brought Olive down, one bale at a time, with her own hand on the back of Olive's sandal.

At the bottom, Olive sat on the ground with her back against the trailer wheel and did not cry, very carefully.

That afternoon, Louise went to find her dad in the workshop, and for once she did most of the talking. Shouting and signs had not worked, she said. They needed two things.

The first was for the big stack. She ran a roll of orange baler twine across the front of it, from post to post, at the height of a child's chest, and tied empty feed sacks to it every few feet so nobody could say they had not seen it. Her dad backed the empty trailer across the open side of the barn, so the twine was the only way in, and said the big stack was out of bounds to everybody, Louise included, until the hay was fed out in the winter.

The second was in the corner of the yard, by the water trough. They built it together: another stack, only three bales high and stepped, like a staircase, with the bales laid tight and checked, loose straw spread thick round the bottom, and a flat place at the top big enough to sit on and see right across to the church. Her dad wrote the one rule on a feed sack and tied it to the end. *OPEN WHEN A GROWN-UP IS IN THE YARD.*

After that, the little stack was open most afternoons, because there nearly always was one: her mum hanging washing by the back door, or her dad mending something on the bench by the trough. Whenever Louise was not needed on the trailer, she was on an upturned bucket by the twine. The younger ones still came for the big stack. Each time, Louise got up and said, "That one's nobody's. This one's yours. Come on." And she took them to the little stack and showed them. Three points on the bales at all times. Never jump a gap. Come down facing in.

Her cousin, who was fifteen and helping with the bales for money, watched all this for a day without a word. On the third day he was standing by the little stack showing a boy of nine how to come down facing in, and pretending he was only there because it was in the shade.

Her dad watched it all from the tractor. Before the week was out there were six more bales by the water trough, and a note on them in his writing that said *For the extension. Wider, not higher.*

The following July, when the hay came in again, the children from the village came up the lane on their bikes, and Louise was out in the far field with the baler and could not get back to the yard till evening.

When she did, she found her mum on a kitchen chair by the water trough, shelling peas into a colander, and on the little stack beside her, Olive, nine now and brown from the summer, was halfway up, turned round, facing the bales. Below her was a girl of five called Elin, Olive's cousin from the town, holding on with both hands.

"Put your foot where my hand is," Olive was saying. "No. That one. Where my hand is."

Sit with this: Is there an older child near you who might be ready to look out for younger ones, with a grown-up close by? Where might a flat "no" become "not that one, but this one"?

Things you might try

Hand over a real job. Not a pretend one. Let a child plan a meal and cook it with you, organise a day out, keep the family calendar, or run the recycling. Choose something that genuinely matters, keep it the right size for their age, and stay nearby. When things are hard at home, a small, steady share, like reading the bus numbers every Thursday, can help a child feel part of the family rather than shut out of it.

Say which decisions are whose. Next time something needs deciding, try sorting it out loud: this one is yours, this one we'll decide together, this one is ours as the grown-ups, and here's why. Children can bear a great deal of "no" when they understand the reason. Even when the decision stays with you, as it should in something like a grandparent coming to live with you, ask the child first what they have noticed and what they would want you to know. A child on the stairs may have seen what nobody thought to ask about.

Make the rules together, and keep them together. Sit down with the back of an envelope, a sheet of paper or the old family rules and ask, "What would make this safe? What would make this fair?" Let children help write the boundaries that touch their lives, and agree what happens if one is broken. Then keep it, kindly and firmly. If there is a rule the children keep, consider keeping it yourself, too.

Change what the room notices. In a classroom, a club or a kitchen, try a board, a notebook or the back of a team sheet where people can name what someone else gave that day: who helped, who made someone laugh, who noticed. You may be surprised by who

turns out to be giving the most. And if there is an older child who could look out for younger ones, at the park, on the walk to school or at a family gathering, tell them you have seen they could, and let them try, with you close by.

❧

Your story

Think back to the first time someone gave you a real say. Perhaps it was a job that mattered, like carrying two teas across a car park, or a rule you were trusted to help write. Perhaps it was a limit someone took the trouble to explain, so that one day you could carry it yourself. Or perhaps you were the grown-up, and a child on the stairs saw something about your home that you had missed. Stay with that moment a while. What did it change?

CHAPTER 9

Mending Without Shame

A child who is allowed to be late in one thing is free to be early in another, and a child who knows the way back is free to come home.

A Saturday morning in the café at a leisure centre: sticky tables, a clanking radiator, a long window onto the pool, and every seat taken by parents waiting for the next lesson to finish.

At one of the tables was a man with his daughter. She was about eight, in a red anorak with the hood still up over her wet hair, and she had asked, very seriously, if she could fetch the hot chocolates from the counter by herself. Her father said yes. She came back with the tray held out in front of her like something in church, her eyes on the two cups.

She caught her foot on the strap of someone's swimming bag. The tray tipped. One cup went over, off the edge and onto the floor, in a brown pool that spread towards the door.

Everything in the café stopped for a second. Anyone could have read her face. It was the face of a child waiting to find out what kind of trouble this was going to be.

Her father got up. He did not rush, and he did not sigh. He took the tray and looked at the floor.

"Right," he said. "That's gone everywhere. Who's going to tell the lady?"

She looked at him. "Me?"

"I'll come with you."

So they went to the counter together, and she said, in a voice so small it barely carried past the counter, what had happened. The woman handed over a mop. The girl mopped. Her father pointed out the bits she had missed under the radiator. Then he bought

another hot chocolate, and she carried that one back too, more slowly than before.

When it was done he said, "There. Done," and that was the end of it. Nobody mentioned it again. Ten minutes later she was kneeling up on her chair, trying to read the pool rules on the wall aloud, and getting stuck on *unaccompanied*, and he waited while she worked it out, a syllable at a time, without telling her. He seemed to have all the time in the world.

When it was time to go, she picked up both empty cups and took them back to the counter on her own.

Her father did not pretend the spill had not happened. It had, and someone had to clean it up, and it was her. But he did not make her small either. The mistake was named, it was mended, and then it was put down, and she walked away from it taller than she had walked in.

By the time a child is eight or ten or thirteen, they have spilt a great many things, and some of their mistakes really do hurt someone. They have also found out something else, often painfully: that they do not grow at the same speed as everyone else. They are quick at one thing and slow at another. Early to read and late to make friends, or the other way round. How we meet these two discoveries stays with a child for years. It helps decide whether they believe they are allowed to be themselves, and whether they believe that what is broken can be put right.

Most of us were taught, one way or another, that shame was how you learned. But a child who is shamed learns mainly to hide, and a child who is hiding cannot mend what they have broken. There is a better order, and it is simple to say. Name the harm. Ask why. Help them put it right. Then let it go, and let them see you let it go.

None of this means pretending things do not matter. A child who struggles may need proper help. A child who has hurt someone needs to face it. But a mistake does not make a child a bad child, and being behind in one thing never means being behind in yourself.

Growing at your own pace, getting things wrong and finding the way back: these belong together more often than we think. And

somewhere in each of them, if things go well, somebody hands a child the mop.

73

The Girl on the Fourteenth Floor

Hattie was nine, and every word that began with a hard sound stuck in her mouth like a boot in mud.

B was the worst. *P* was nearly as bad. She could feel the word coming, and then her jaw would lock and her eyes would screw shut and nothing would happen, and the other children would wait, or worse, finish it for her. So she had stopped putting her hand up. At school she said as little as she could manage. She was good at nodding.

At home it was different. Home was a flat on the fourteenth floor of a tower block on the edge of the city centre, and from the little balcony you could see the cathedral, the ring road, the canal and a great deal of sky. Her mum was at home with her baby brother, and her dad started at the sorting office at five in the morning, and in the afternoons, when he was home and the baby was napping, Hattie and her dad sat on two kitchen chairs on the balcony and watched the birds.

There were a lot of them, once you looked. Starlings on the aerials. Herring gulls that came in from the tip. Feral pigeons, which her dad said were just rock doves who had moved to town. And in the spring of that year, on a ledge high on the cathedral tower, a pair of peregrine falcons.

Hattie could do all their calls. She could whistle a starling's clicks and wheezes so well that once a real one answered. She could do the gull's laugh, and the soft rolling coo of the pigeons. When she was making bird sounds, nothing stuck at all.

It was her teacher, Mr Fenwick, who rang her dad in February and asked whether Hattie had ever seen a speech and language therapist. She had, when she was five, for a few weeks, and then they

had moved, and the referral had got lost somewhere between two offices. Her dad sat at the kitchen table that night with the letter in front of him, wondering how it had slipped past them, between the early starts and the new baby. Mr Fenwick said that was nobody's fault at that table, and chased it himself.

The therapist was a brisk, kind woman called Meg, who came into school on Wednesday mornings. She did not try to make the stammer go away. She taught Hattie to slide into a word instead of charging at it, to let the first sound come out soft and long. *Sssstarling.* She taught her that she was allowed to take her time, and that the person listening could wait.

It was hard work, and it was slow. Some Wednesdays Hattie came out of the little room and would not speak to anyone for the rest of the day. But Meg had asked her, on the first morning, what she liked to talk about, and Hattie, after a long pause, had said, "B-b-birds." So the practice sentences were about birds. *The peregrine is the fastest animal on earth.* Hattie said that sentence perhaps three hundred times.

In May the cathedral put up a camera on the falcons' ledge, and three chicks hatched, and the whole city went a bit mad about it. Mr Fenwick asked the class if anyone would like to give a short talk at Friday assembly. He did not look at Hattie when he asked. He did not need to.

Her hand went up. She did not quite know it was going to.

On the Friday she stood at the front of the hall with two hundred children sitting cross-legged on the floor and the teachers along the wall bars. Her dad was at the back, with the baby asleep in the sling. Mr Fenwick had put the camera picture up on the big screen: three white, fluffy chicks and a parent bird the colour of slate.

"The p—" said Hattie. Her jaw locked.

Nobody laughed. She took a breath, the way Meg had taught her, and let the word slide. "The pppperegrine," she said, "is the fastest animal on earth."

She talked for three minutes. She got stuck nine or ten times. Each time she stopped, breathed, and went on, and the hall waited for her. She told them that the falcons dive at more than two

hundred miles an hour. She told them that the female is bigger than the male. She told them that they had nearly died out before she was born, and now there was a pair on the cathedral you could see from her balcony.

Then she said, "This is what they s-sound like," and she put her head back and made the call: a harsh, ringing *kek-kek-kek-kek* that went up into the roof of the hall and bounced off the climbing frames.

Two hundred children turned round to look at the window.

Sit with this: What does a child you know already love so much that they forget to be afraid of it?

74

Custard for Forty

Declan was thirteen, and on a Tuesday in October he kicked a hole through the door of the boys' toilets at school.

He had not planned to. A boy had said something about his mum, and his mum was not around to defend herself, which was the whole point of him living with Vera. The next thing he knew there was a splintered gap at the bottom of the door and the head of year was standing in the corridor with her arms folded. He was suspended for five days.

Vera had been his foster carer for eight months. She was sixty-one, a retired school cook, and she lived in a narrow house in a seaside town, three streets back from the front, where the wind came round the corner with sand in it. She read the letter from school at the kitchen table. Then she put it under the fruit bowl.

"Well," she said. "You can't sit in your room for five days. You'll go mad and so will I. Get your coat."

Declan expected to be taken somewhere to be told off. Vera rang his social worker first, and then the school, to say where he would be all week and that he would be with her the whole time. On the Wednesday she had him clearing out her shed. On the Thursday she

took him to the church hall on the corner of Marine Road, where on Tuesdays and Thursdays a lunch club fed about forty older people from the town. Vera ran the kitchen. Most of the other volunteers were older than she was.

"This is Declan," she told them. "He's with me this week."

Nobody asked why he was not at school. A man called Mr Tasker, who was in charge of the tea urn and had been for fifteen years, gave him an apron and pointed at the sink.

Declan washed up. There was a great deal of it. Forty plates, forty bowls, forty cups, the big roasting tins with the burnt bits in the corners. He did it badly at first and Mr Tasker sent three plates back, without comment, just by putting them beside him on the draining board. By the time the main course had gone out, Declan's hands were wrinkled and he had stopped thinking about the toilet door for whole minutes at a time.

Then Vera let him out of the kitchen to carry the puddings through. The hall was full of noise and the smell of gravy. An old woman in a purple hat asked him if he was Vera's grandson. He said no, he was just helping. "Well, you're very good at it," she said, which was not something people often said to him.

On the following Tuesday, his last day off school, Vera's phone rang at half past eleven. Her sister had had a fall. Vera stood in the kitchen doorway with her coat half on and looked at the cooker, where the potatoes were boiling and the sponge puddings were in the oven, and the custard had not been made.

"Mr Tasker will finish the main," she said. "The custard's yours. Milk, powder, sugar, it's all written on the cupboard. Don't stop stirring. Don't let it catch." And she was gone.

Declan read the card on the cupboard four times. He measured the powder into a jug and mixed it to a paste, the way it said, and heated the milk in the biggest pan he had ever seen. He poured, and he stirred. He did not stop stirring. His arm ached. Mr Tasker came past once, looked into the pan, and went away again without saying anything, which Declan had learned by now was praise.

It came out thick and yellow and smooth. Not a single lump.

He carried the jugs out himself. The woman in the purple hat tasted it, put her spoon down, and called across to the next table that this was the best custard she had had in that hall in nine years, and she should know. Someone clapped. Declan went back into the kitchen very fast and stood at the sink with his back to the door.

When Vera got home that night he was sitting at the kitchen table with a piece of paper. He had crossed out the first two goes.

"What's that?"

"For Mr Holt," he said. Mr Holt was the school caretaker. "About the door. I want to pay for it. Out of my money. And I want to help him fix it, if he'll let me."

Vera read it. She did not make a speech. She said, "He might," and went to hang up her coat.

Mr Holt did let him. They rehung the door together the following Saturday, with Declan holding it steady while the caretaker drove in the screws. That was not the end of the trouble. Declan still lost his temper sometimes, and there were more letters from school before the year was out.

But on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the holidays he went to the church hall. And if you went there at about a quarter past twelve, you would find a tall boy at the cooker with his sleeves pushed up, stirring a very large pan, not stopping.

> *Sit with this:* When a child is sent out, is there anywhere that lets them in? What job could you hand them that someone is really counting on?

75

The Worst Game in the World

On Wednesdays Phoebe went to her grandad's after school, because her mum worked late at the opticians, and in the October half-term, when it rained for five days without stopping, the two of them invented a board game.

It was Dennis's idea to begin with. He had a box of old games in the airing cupboard, and every one of them was missing something. Monopoly had no money. Cluedo had no murderer. The draughts had been reduced, over thirty years of grandchildren, to nine draughts and a button. So he flattened out a cereal box on the kitchen table, gave Phoebe the felt tips, and said, "Right. We'll make our own. How hard can it be?"

It turned out to be quite hard.

Phoebe drew the board, a long wiggling path of squares from START, which was the biscuit tin, to HOME, which was the bread bin. Dennis wrote the rules on the back of an envelope in his careful capitals. They used the button and a chess knight for counters, and since there was only one dice in the whole flat, and it had gone under the fridge in about 1998, they used a slipper. You threw it across the kitchen and counted how many lino tiles it landed from the cooker.

The first game took two hours and nobody won. On close inspection, there was no way to reach the bread bin. Every path led back to the biscuit tin.

"That's not a mistake," said Dennis. "That's a feature."

"It's a mistake, Grandad."

"All right, it's a mistake." He crossed out Rule Four, firmly, with one line, so you could still read it underneath. "Rule Four, cancelled, for being rubbish. Draw a bridge."

She drew a bridge.

The next Wednesday it was too easy, and Phoebe won in four minutes, which was nice for about four minutes. So they added the Swamp, where you missed a go. Then the Swamp got bigger, because Dennis put his mug down on it and the cereal box went soggy, and Phoebe said that was obviously the Swamp spreading and drew frogs round the edge. Then they added the Cards of Doom, cut out of the box the teabags came in, which said things like *SING A SONG OR GO BACK THREE* and *SWAP PLACES WITH THE BUTTON*. Dennis wrote one that said *GRANDAD WINS*, and Phoebe found it and crossed it out and wrote underneath, *NICE TRY*.

By Christmas the rules filled both sides of the envelope and the back of a gas bill. A lot of them were crossed out. Rule Nine said you could not throw the slipper at the cat. Rule Eleven said you could not throw the slipper at Grandad either. Rule Twelve, in Phoebe's writing, said *exept if he is cheating*, and was still under discussion.

Because he did cheat, a bit. And so did she.

One Wednesday in January Dennis went to answer the door to the man about the meter, and when he came back Phoebe's chess knight was two squares from the bread bin, and the slipper was where she had left it, three tiles out from the cooker.

He looked at the knight. He looked at Phoebe. Phoebe went pink from her neck upwards and looked hard at the frogs.

"I see," said Dennis. He sat down. "Well. That's a new rule, isn't it."

She looked up.

"Rule Nineteen," he said, writing. "If you get caught, you have to say sorry in the voice of a duck and go back to the biscuit tin. Then we carry on."

There was a long pause. Then Phoebe said, "Sorry," in the voice of a duck, very quietly at first and then much louder, because it was impossible to say it quietly and not laugh, and she took her knight all the way back to the biscuit tin, and they carried on. Four weeks later Dennis was caught moving the button with his elbow and had to do the duck himself, in front of her mum, who had come early and stood in the doorway in her coat, quite unable to speak.

The game was called The Worst Game in the World. It said so on the lid, which was a shoebox. Phoebe had written it in her best bubble writing, and Dennis had added underneath, in his capitals, *PROBABLY*.

At Easter the whole family came for lunch, eleven of them in a flat meant for two, and somebody made the mistake of asking what it was. By four o'clock the cereal box was on the table among the plates, and two cousins were on the floor arguing about the Swamp. Her uncle had thrown the slipper into the sink. Grandad's sister, who

was eighty-four and had not been told about Rule Nineteen, was caught red-handed with the button up her sleeve.

The whole room turned to her.

And Phoebe and her grandad, from opposite ends of the table, said it together, in exactly the same tone of voice.

"Back to the biscuit tin."

Sit with this: When a child is caught bending the rules of a game, what do you think they are hoping will happen next?

76

Eleven Red Lines

Ollie was eleven, and by the first week of December he had been late for school twenty-three times.

His form tutor, Mrs Kenyon, had the number in front of her because the computer kept it for her. Every time he came through the door after the bell, she typed an L next to his name, and every second L made a detention, and the detention went in red in his planner for his mum to sign. There were eleven red lines in his planner now. His mum had signed every one of them in small, careful handwriting, and never once written anything back.

Ollie always said the same thing. "Overslept, miss." He said it to the floor. Then he sat down at the back with his coat still on and his bag on his knee, and that was the other thing Mrs Kenyon had started to notice: the bag. It was a big black rucksack with a broken zip, held shut with a bulldog clip, and he carried it everywhere. To PE. To lunch. Into detention, where he sat with it on his lap for forty minutes as if someone might take it off him.

On the Thursday of that week he was late again, for the twenty-fourth time. It was his twelfth detention, and he fell asleep in it.

Mrs Kenyon sat at her desk and watched him for a while. His head had gone down on his arms on top of the rucksack. His school shoes were split along one side. The radiator ticked. She had been

teaching for nineteen years, and she found that she was ashamed of herself, quite suddenly.

She let him sleep until the forty minutes were up. Then she said his name, gently, and when he sat up blinking she left the time alone.

"Ollie," she said. "Why is your bag so heavy?"

He looked at her the way children look at an adult when they are working out how much trouble the truth will be.

"It's all my stuff," he said.

It came out slowly, a piece at a time. He and his mum had lost the flat in the summer. The council had put them in a bed and breakfast on the far side of town, one room on the second floor with two beds and a kettle on the windowsill. Six weeks, the council had told his mum, at the most. It had been nearly five months. Four families shared the bathroom at the end of the corridor, and in the mornings there was a queue for it. Breakfast in the basement started at half past seven. Then it was two buses, and the second one was always full by the time it reached his stop, and sometimes it went straight past him.

He carried his things because the room had no lock that he trusted, and because once, in September, his PE kit had gone and not come back.

"Why didn't you tell me?" said Mrs Kenyon, and then wished she had not, because it sounded like one more thing he had got wrong.

Ollie shrugged. "You didn't ask, miss."

She sat with that. Then she said, "No. I didn't. I gave you twelve detentions instead of asking you one question, and that was my mistake, not yours. I'm sorry."

He stared at her. He did not seem to know where to put it.

"Right," she said, and pulled a sheet of paper towards her. "So it's not a you problem. It's a getting-here problem. Let's look at it."

They looked at it together. The school ran a breakfast club from eight o'clock in the dining hall. If he skipped the basement queue and caught the first bus at ten past seven, he would be in by ten to eight, before the second bus filled up, with toast and cereal waiting. Mrs Kenyon rang down to Shirley, who ran the breakfast club. Shirley

said she had a spare place and that she would put a crumpet on for him on his first morning.

Then Mrs Kenyon went to the site office and came back with a padlock and a locker number. It was a tall grey locker at the end of the science corridor, right by the door he came in by, with his name on a strip of masking tape.

Before he left she asked for his planner. She turned to the page with the eleven red lines on it and wrote underneath them, in ordinary blue biro: *These were my mistake, not Ollie's. They are cancelled. Please ring me if there is anything else I should know. Mrs Kenyon.*

When Ollie had gone, she walked along the corridor to Mr Adeyemi, who looked out for the children the school was worried about, because a family in a bed and breakfast for five months was not something to be solved with toast and a padlock. By the end of the week Ollie had shoes that fitted and a PE kit from the uniform cupboard, and Mr Adeyemi had been on the phone to the council, more than once, about the six weeks that had become five months.

His mum rang the next evening. Mrs Kenyon could hear a television through a thin wall, and a woman who was trying not to cry and was only partly managing it.

On Monday morning Mrs Kenyon was on gate duty. At ten to eight, when the playground was still empty and the frost was white on the netball court, she saw Ollie come in through the side gate and walk across towards the dining hall.

He had his hands free. His arms swung at his sides. There was nothing on his back at all.

> *Sit with this:* When a child keeps getting the same thing wrong, what might it be costing them to get it right? Have they ever heard an adult say, "That was my mistake"?

77

The School That Learned to Sit in a Circle

A true story

In 2004 a woman called Estelle Macdonald became head teacher of Collingwood Primary School in Hull.

The school was in special measures, which means that inspectors had judged it to need urgent help to improve. Later, looking back, she described what she had found there as "disconnected relationships, people in conflict and little coherence or shared vision of how to move forward."

Many of the children came from families going through hard times. Exclusion, conflict and absence were part of daily life. Anyone who has worked in a school where things have gone that far wrong will know some of what that means: the tension in the corridors, the children who are missing more often than they are present, the staff who are worn out, the parents who have stopped expecting good news.

What she did about it was not, in the first place, a new set of rules or a tougher set of punishments. She built the life of the school around two things. The first she called "high challenge and high support": expecting a great deal of everyone, children and adults alike, and giving them real help to meet those expectations. The second was relationships.

Classes began to meet in circles. A circle is a very old and very simple thing. When people sit in one, there is no front and no back. Everyone can see everyone else's face. In the circles at Collingwood, every child and every adult could speak, and be heard.

And when harm was done, something changed in how it was handled. Instead of a punishment simply being handed down, the people involved were brought together to talk. They talked about what had happened. They talked about who had been affected by it. And they talked about what was needed to put it right.

These ways of working became known as restorative practice. The word says what it means. The aim is to restore: to mend what has been damaged, between people, so that everyone can carry on together. It does not mean that nobody is responsible. Quite the opposite. Harm is named out loud, in front of the people it touched, and it is put right. What it does not do is send anyone out of the circle for good.

The school changed.

Collingwood came out of special measures quickly. In 2006, two years after she arrived, inspectors rated it outstanding. The school reported less disruption in lessons and fewer lost breaks. It reported fewer racial incidents. It reported better attendance, both among pupils and among staff, and families who were more involved in the life of the school.

These are the school's own reports and an inspection grade, rather than the findings of an outside study, and they should be read that way. But behind the reports there are children, and one of them stands out.

There was a girl in Year 6 who had struggled with her attendance, her behaviour and her learning. By the end of her time at the school she had reached full attendance and, in the school's words, "successful happy engagement". And her mother went back to work for the first time in fifteen years.

A child begins to come to school every day, and to be glad to be there. And her mother, who has been out of work for fifteen years, finds her way back too. Nobody can say exactly how one led to the other. But it is hard to read it without feeling that the circle reached further than the classroom walls.

Hull itself later set out to become a restorative city, taking the same ideas into other parts of its life.

What is striking about the story is that the circle did not lift one child at the expense of the others. It was not a special scheme for the most difficult pupils, or a reward for the best behaved. The same practice, of being heard and of putting harm right, was offered to

every child and every adult in the building. Mending became the ordinary life of the school, rather than an exception made for a few.

A school in special measures did not rise by finding better punishments. By its own account, it rose as the people in it learned to sit in a circle and say what had happened, and what would put it right.

> *Sit with this:* When something goes wrong in your home or classroom, who gets to speak? What would change if everyone affected sat down together and was heard?

78

The Square in the Corner

The quilt on Nan's bed was older than Annie's mum.

Nan's own mother had made it, out of scraps, in the winter of the 1972 miners' strike, when there was no money for anything new. It had a hundred and forty-four squares. Annie had counted them. Some were flowered cotton from old frocks, some were striped shirting, one was dark blue wool from a pit-village brass band uniform. In the bottom corner there was a square with a brown stain on it shaped a bit like Wales, which Nan said was cocoa, and was Annie's mum's fault, from when she was six.

Annie was eight and had lived with Nan, in a bungalow at the end of a cul-de-sac in an old mining village, since she was three. Her mum was not well enough to look after her, and lived in a flat in Doncaster, and rang at weekends when she could. The bungalow had a gas fire, a budgie that said nothing, and Nan.

On a wet Saturday in November, Annie was making paper snowflakes on Nan's bed, because the light was best in that room. She had the big orange-handled scissors from the kitchen drawer, which she was not supposed to use. She folded, and cut, and folded, and cut, and when she lifted the last snowflake away, there was a cut in the quilt underneath. Two cuts, in fact, making a flap the size of a

stamp, right through a square of yellow cotton with tiny white daisies on it.

She sat and looked at it.

Then she pressed the flap down very hard with her thumb, as if it might heal. It did not. She folded the quilt back on itself so the cut was underneath, and smoothed it, and put the scissors back in the drawer, and went and sat in the front room with the budgie and was very quiet for the rest of the afternoon.

Nan found it that night, turning down the bed. Annie heard her go quiet. Then she heard her come along the passage.

Nan sat down on the end of Annie's bed. She had the quilt over her arm, folded so that the yellow square was on top.

"I've found this," she said.

Annie pulled the covers up to her nose.

"I'm sad about it," said Nan. "I'll not pretend I'm not. My mam made this, and I've slept under it fifty years." She was quiet a moment. "And I'm cross about the scissors. You know you're not to have them."

Annie's eyes filled up.

"But I'm more cross that you hid it," said Nan. "Not the cut. The hiding. Things get broken in this house. That's what houses are for. But I want to know about it, so we can sort it."

Annie said, through the covers, "Can you mend it?"

"No," said Nan. "But you can. Come on."

It was nearly nine o'clock. Nan got the sewing tin out from under the telly and spread the quilt over the kitchen table, under the big light. She showed Annie how the old squares had been mended before. Annie had never noticed. There were a dozen of them, once you looked. A patch on a patch, in a slightly different blue. A row of tiny stitches across a tear, in cotton that did not quite match. A darn on the band uniform square.

"That one's my brother's," said Nan, pointing at the darn. "He put his foot through it, jumping on the bed. I was there. He got such a hiding." She laughed. "Not from me."

They looked through the rag bag together. Annie chose a piece of her own old school cardigan, bottle green, that she had grown out of in the summer. Nan cut a square from it, and Annie, with her tongue between her teeth and Nan's hands over hers for the first few, sewed it over the yellow daisies. Her stitches were large and wandering. Nan did not unpick a single one.

It took until half past ten. It was the latest Annie had ever been allowed up.

When it was done, the quilt had a hundred and forty-four squares still, and one of them was bottle green and slightly crooked, with stitches you could see from across the room.

Nan put it back on her bed. And after that, when Annie got in beside her on Sunday mornings, after her mum had rung or not rung, she would find the square with her fingers under the covers without looking, between the cocoa stain and the band uniform, and keep her hand on it.

> *Sit with this:* When something precious is broken in your home, is it safer to tell or to hide? What have you mended that you would want a child to see?

79

Two Herons

When Ronald was fourteen, he stopped talking to his dad.

It was not dramatic. There was no single row. His parents had separated the year before, and Ronald spent Wednesday to Saturday at his dad's new house on the other side of the Pennines, and somewhere in that first year a door had closed. He answered in single words. He wore his earbuds at the table. He went to his room after tea and did not come out. When his dad asked him something, there was a pause just long enough to say *I heard you, and I'm not going to answer properly.*

His dad, William, was a quantity surveyor who had never been good at feelings, and knew it. He lay awake a good deal that year.

People gave him advice. His brother said to leave the lad alone, he'd come round. His ex-wife said, not unkindly, that Ronald was like that with her too. A colleague told him to take the phone off him until he started speaking. William did not do that. But he did keep the rules that mattered. The phone stayed downstairs after ten. Ronald went to his swimming club on Wednesdays, every week, because he had chosen it himself two years before and had a gala in the summer. When Ronald broke the rules, there were consequences, and William stuck to them, even when it meant a weekend of silence on top of the usual silence.

Swimming was in the next town, twenty minutes away. There were two ways to get there. One was the main road. The other, longer by ten minutes, went up over the moor and round the edge of a reservoir, past a line of dead trees standing in the water.

When Ronald was small, they had always gone the reservoir way. It had been their game. William would drive slowly along the top road, and they would look for herons, which stood in the shallows among the drowned trees as still as bits of wood. Whoever saw one first said, "Heron." That was the whole game. Ronald had once seen seven in one trip and talked about it for a month.

William went the reservoir way every Wednesday that year.

Ronald sat in the passenger seat with his hood up and his earbuds in and looked at his phone. He did not look out of the window. Every week, as they came round the top of the reservoir, William scanned the shallows, and if there was a heron, he said, "Heron," out loud, in an ordinary voice, and drove on.

There was never any answer.

He nearly stopped many times. It felt foolish. It felt, some weeks, like talking to an empty car. There was a week in January when Ronald had been caught with cigarettes at school and had shouted at him in the kitchen, and William drove the reservoir road that Wednesday with his jaw set and very nearly said nothing. He said it anyway. "Heron."

Nothing.

There was a parents' evening William went to alone, sitting on a plastic chair while a teacher said Ronald seemed withdrawn, and he said yes, he knew. There was a Saturday Ronald did not come back until eleven and his phone was off, and William stood at the front window for two hours. There were consequences for that too, and Ronald barely spoke for a week.

And every Wednesday, the reservoir road.

It was the following March, nearly a year after it had started, on a raw grey evening with the water the colour of slate. William came round the top bend and saw one standing at the edge of the drowned trees, hunched against the wind.

"Heron," he said.

From the passenger seat, without taking his earbuds out, without lifting his eyes from his phone, Ronald said, "Two."

William looked again. There was a second one, further out, almost invisible against a dead trunk.

He did not trust himself to speak. He drove on round the reservoir and down off the moor, very carefully, with both hands on the wheel.

They did not talk properly that evening. Or the next. But the following Wednesday, as they came over the top, Ronald had his earbuds out, and he was looking out of the window before William was.

> *Sit with this:* When a child turns away, what is your reservoir road? Can you keep both the rule and the old game going until they are ready?

80

The Greenhouse Glass

Sally was twelve when she smashed four panes of glass in Mr Bellamy's greenhouse, in the last back garden before the railway line.

It was a Sunday evening in May, and there were three of them: Sally and two boys from Year 9 she had started hanging round with

by the garages. One of the boys had picked up a stone from the railway path and thrown it over the fence, and the crack of the glass going had made them all shriek. Then the other boy threw one, and handed Sally a stone, and looked at her. So she threw it. Then another. It felt, for about eight seconds, like flying.

The boys ran when the back door of the house banged. Sally did not run fast enough. Mr Bellamy, who was seventy-four and had come out to shut the greenhouse for the night, did not need to run. He knew who she was. He had known her mum since school.

He did not phone the police. He walked her home.

Her mum opened the door in her nurse's tunic, about to leave for a night shift. Her stepdad, Lionel, was behind her in the hall with a tea towel over his shoulder. Mr Bellamy told them, plainly, what had happened, and how many panes, and that his tomato plants had been underneath.

Sally's mum went very white, and then very quiet.

"I'm ashamed of what you've done," she said. She said it in front of Mr Bellamy, in a low voice, which was far worse than shouting. "That's an old man's greenhouse. That's his whole summer."

And then she took Sally's hand.

She did not let go of it. She held it the whole time she and Mr Bellamy talked, standing on the doorstep: how much the glass would cost, how long before his plants would be ruined in the cold, what should happen next. Sally cried through all of it and her mum's hand stayed exactly where it was, warm and tight, and slightly damp.

Her mum rang in late to work, which she never did. Lionel made toast nobody ate. When Mr Bellamy had gone, her mum sat on the stairs with Sally beside her and asked her, simply, why.

Sally told her. About the boys, and the garages, and how it felt when they let her stand with them. About the stone in her hand and the way the boy had looked at her. About not even wanting to.

Her mum listened to the end. Then she said she understood wanting to belong somewhere, and that she was still very angry. Both at once. She kissed the top of Sally's head and went to work.

The next morning there was a note on the kitchen table in Mr Bellamy's handwriting, which Lionel said he had brought round at seven. It said: *Saturday, 9 o'clock. Bring gloves.*

Sally went. Lionel walked her round and stayed, with a flask and the paper on the bench by Mr Bellamy's back door, because Mr Bellamy had said on the phone that the work was hers to do, not anyone else's.

They spent the whole morning on it. Mr Bellamy showed her how to take out the broken glass, piece by piece, with thick gloves, and drop it into a bucket. He showed her how to scrape out the old putty with a knife and clip in the new panes, which he had bought on Thursday and she was paying for, out of her birthday money and three months of pocket money. Her hands were cold and she cut her thumb once, through the glove, and he put a plaster on it from a tin in his shed without any fuss.

They did not talk much. When they did, it was about tomatoes. He had grown them in that greenhouse for twenty-six years. Eleven plants had survived the cold nights. Four had not.

At twelve o'clock he looked at the four new panes, clean and bright among the old green-tinged ones, and nodded.

"Come back in August," he said. "See how they've done."

The boys from the garages stopped speaking to her after that. It hurt, for longer than she let anyone see.

But in August she went back. The greenhouse was dense and warm and smelt green, and the plants were taller than she was. Mr Bellamy picked a tomato off the nearest one, from right under the new glass, and held it out to her, still hot from the sun.

Sit with this: When a child has done something truly wrong, can we hold the anger and their hand at the same time?

81

The Principal Cornet

Rory was thirteen and principal cornet in the town youth brass band.

It was a proper band, the kind with a banner and a history, and its members were between ten and eighteen. Rory had been playing since he was seven, and he was very good. He sat on the end of the front row, which was the principal's seat, and he played the solos, and he knew it. The younger players were a little afraid of him. The conductor, Mr Thornton, who had been a miner and then a bus driver and had conducted the band for twenty-two years, kept an eye on him.

In November the band went to the regional contest, an hour away by coach, in a big Victorian hall with a domed glass roof. They had been working on the test piece since September.

In the slow middle section there was a short solo for second cornet, played by a girl called Violet. She was eleven. She had moved up from the training band only that summer, and she had been practising the solo in her bedroom every night for two months, her mum said, until the neighbours could hum it.

On the day, in front of the judges, her nerves went. The top note of the solo cracked, split into two sounds at once, a little goose-honk in the middle of the quiet. It was over in a second. The band finished the piece well. They came fourth out of eleven.

On the coach home, Rory did an impression of the cracked note.

He did it loudly, from the back seat, and the people round him laughed. He did it again. Then, because it was getting a laugh, he said that the band would have placed if it was not for some people who should still be in the training band. He did not say her name. He did not need to.

Violet was four rows in front. She put her coat over her head and kept it there until they got back to the band room. She did not come to rehearsal on Tuesday, or on Thursday. Her mum rang Mr Thornton and said Violet was talking about giving up.

Mr Thornton had heard all of it on the coach. He had decided not to deal with it there, in front of everyone, in the dark. On the following Tuesday he asked Rory to come in fifteen minutes before the others.

The band room was cold. The heaters had not warmed up. Mr Thornton sat on a plastic chair with his coat still on.

"What do you think should happen?" he asked.

Rory shrugged. "Don't know."

Mr Thornton let the silence sit. Then he said, "How long did it take you to stop cracking your top notes?"

Rory did not answer.

"I remember," said Mr Thornton. "Two years, about. You were nine. You cried in the toilets after the Whit Friday march. I remember who sat with you." He stood up and began putting out stands. "Have a think."

Rory remembered too. It had been the old principal cornet, a girl called Hilda, who had since gone to music college.

On Thursday, Violet came back. Her mum had talked her into one more rehearsal. Before they had played a note, Rory stood up from the end of the front row and asked Mr Thornton if he could say something.

The band went quiet. Thirty players, some of them very small, with their instruments on their knees.

Rory turned round to face the second cornets. His ears were red. He said that what he had done on the coach was horrible, and that he was sorry. He said Violet's name. He said the solo had been the hardest bit in the piece and that she had played most of it really well. He said that he used to crack his top notes all the time, for about two years, and someone had sat with him in the toilets instead of laughing.

Then he said that nobody in the band should ever take the mickey out of someone for a split note again. And he added, "Including me."

The room was quiet. Then Violet nodded, without looking up, and Mr Thornton said, "Right. Hymn tune. From the top," and lifted his stick.

Violet played the solo at the spring concert. It did not crack.

Rory kept the end seat. He was still loud, and still knew he was good. But something had shifted in the band, and everyone felt it.

For the rest of that year, if anyone sniggered when a younger player split a note in rehearsal, heads would turn towards the end of the front row.

And Rory, without taking the cornet from his lips, would just shake his head.

Sit with this: What does a young person learn about strength when they see someone strong say sorry?

Things you might try

Name it, ask why, help mend it, let it go. The next time a child you love does something wrong, try going through these four steps, slowly, in order. Say plainly what happened and who it hurt. Ask what they were trying to do, as Sally's mum asked her, and really listen to the answer. Help them find a way to put it right with their own hands, their own words or their own pocket money. And then let it go, out loud, so that they can see it has been set down.

Look for the door they already love. If a child is struggling with something, reading, numbers, friendships, school itself, make sure someone is helping them, and keep asking until they are. But also notice what they are already drawn to: birds, as Hattie was, or bicycles, horses, chess. Very often the hard work can come in through that door.

Start a board, or a jar, of good mistakes. At home or in a classroom, keep somewhere for the things that went wrong and what they taught you. Put the first one up yourself, preferably something a bit embarrassing. And when you get something wrong with a child, as Mrs Kenyon did with Ollie, say so plainly, say sorry, and then get on with putting it right. Cross mistakes out instead of rubbing them out, the way a good family rule book does. Children learn what is safe to try by watching what the adults around them laugh about.

Keep the boundary and keep the memory. If a child has pulled away from you, hold on to the rules that keep them safe, and keep

remembering out loud who they are underneath. A meal, the long way round to swimming, a small kindness that asks nothing back. It may be a long time before anything changes. You do not have to set the timetable. You only have to make sure there is something there to come back to.

Your story

Think back to something you got wrong as a child. A cup that went over, a window, a word on the coach home that you wanted back the moment it was out. What happened next? Was there someone who handed you the mop and waited while you used it, or someone who made you small? Or think of a thing you were slow at, and who let you take your time. Stay with it for a minute. Who in your life now might be waiting to be handed the mop?



Go and show the world who you are.

PART FOUR

The Leaving Years

Fifteen to twenty-one

The passage into adulthood is a slow opening of the hand. Young people in these years are already teaching us, if we let them. They are testing their own values against the world's, finding the people who will stand around them, and beginning to ask what they will give. The grown-up who once turned a baby round to face the family now has the hardest and most loving task of all: to step back, keep the door open, and trust what has been growing all along. These closing chapters are about the child who becomes the teacher, the circle that holds them, and the freedom to go.

CHAPTER 10

When the Child Teaches

One day the child you have been explaining things to turns round and shows you something you had never seen.

The outpatients waiting room was running forty minutes late one winter afternoon, the kind of room where the clock seems to go slower than clocks elsewhere, and a father and his daughter sat side by side on the plastic chairs. She was perhaps sixteen. He had a folded newspaper and a biro, and he was working at the crossword the way some people work at a stuck jar lid.

He read a clue out, half to himself. She was looking out of the window at the car park in the rain. Without turning her head, she said the answer.

He counted the squares. It fitted. He looked at her over the top of his glasses. "How did you get that?"

"I don't know," she said. "It's just right."

"That's not an answer."

"I know it isn't. Give me a minute."

She took the paper off him, and the pen, and sat with the clue while four or five names were called, frowning, writing letters in the margin and crossing them out. Somewhere after a name nobody answered to, she found it: the little trick the setter had buried in the clue, the word hiding inside two other words. She explained it to him, badly at first, then well. He laughed out loud, the way people do when something they have been staring at for an age suddenly turns inside out.

Then he did the thing that makes the afternoon worth telling. He did not take the paper back. He pushed the pen across to her as well and said, "Go on, then. Do the next one. And show me how."

She did. For the rest of the wait he was the pupil, and she was patient with him, more patient, perhaps, than he had sometimes been with her over homework at the kitchen table.

Nobody else in that waiting room would have noticed anything. But two things happened there, and this chapter is about both of them.

The first is that she knew before she could explain. I have come to believe that somewhere in the middle teens, many young people stop asking only what is true and start asking how anyone could possibly know. It can sound like cheek, and sometimes it is. More often it is a mind waking up and finding it would rather see for itself than be told. And alongside the asking there is often another kind of knowing, quieter, that arrives first and waits for the reasons to catch up. A young person will sense that something is right or wrong, real or fake, well before they can say why. It is easy to dismiss, and it is not nothing. It does not shout. It simply knows, and then, if it is given time, it goes and finds its proof.

The second is that the father let it turn round. He let the one he had always explained things to explain something to him.

That is what this last part of the book is about: the leaving years, the passage into adulthood from about fifteen to twenty-one, when the young begin to find the deep rules of life for themselves, and more and more often turn round and show the rest of us. A truth learned for an exam is usually gone by the summer. A truth found with your own eyes and hands, worked out over a long wait with the letters crossed out in the margin, stays for life.

If you are fifteen, or nineteen, and you have picked this book up off the kitchen table, then this chapter is written to you. You do not have to believe anything in it. You are allowed to test it, the way you are allowed to test what your teachers and your parents and your faith have told you. That is not disrespect. It is the only way anything true becomes yours.

And if you are the adult beside a young person, this may be the season in which you become the pupil. Let it happen. Push the pen across. Ask them to show you how, even with something you

thought you already knew. A young person who has once taught an adult something real often carries themselves a little differently afterwards.

82

The Letter That Was Never Sent

Faye was fifteen, and her mock results came home in a brown envelope on the last Friday before Christmas.

They were not bad. They were not what her dad had hoped for. She could tell from the way he read them at the kitchen table, all the way down and then all the way down again, as if a better set might be hiding underneath.

"Well," said Rhys. "There's time." He folded the sheet in three and put it in the bureau with the bills. "We'll look at a tutor for maths after Christmas."

That was all. He did not shout. He never shouted. He went back to the washing-up and whistled, the way he did when he was worried.

Later, from the landing, she heard him on the phone to her nan. "She's bright, Mum. She's so bright. I just don't know why it isn't showing."

Faye went to her room and sat on the bed with her coat still on.

On Saturday she wrote him a letter. Her friend Jodie came round to help, lying on the floor with a bag of crisps, reading bits back in a newsreader's voice.

"'You don't love me. You love the daughter you've got planned.' That's good. That's really good. Put it in capitals."

"I'm not putting it in capitals."

"Underline it, then."

Faye underlined it. It took three drafts and most of the crisps. By the end it filled both sides of a sheet of lined paper. It said that she was not a project. That she liked history and drawing and, most days, herself. That she was tired of being the person he was waiting for instead of the one sitting across the table.

She did not give it to him. She carried it about in her blazer pocket for a week.

What she needed, she decided, was proof that he had not been perfect either. So on the Thursday, while he was at work, she pulled down the loft ladder and went looking for his old school reports.

She found them in a box marked RHYS – SCHOOL, under a cricket bat and a lampshade with a hole in it. Mostly Cs. *Rhys is capable of far more than he shows.* She nearly laughed out loud.

Then, tucked inside the last one, folded in four, there was a letter in blue ink, in a hand she knew but younger and more sloping. *Dad,* it began. He would have been fifteen.

She read it on the joists by the light of her phone. It said he was sick of being compared. That his dad only ever looked at the marks and never at him. That he was proud of a boy who did not exist. *You love the son you want me to turn into. You've never met the one who's actually here.*

There was no envelope. No stamp. It had never left the box.

Her grandad had died when she was four. She knew him from one photograph on her nan's mantelpiece: a big man in a flat cap, holding up a prize marrow as if it were a baby.

Faye sat in the cold until her phone warned her it was down to ten per cent. Then she climbed down. She did not tear up her own letter. She slipped his inside it.

That evening she put them both on the kitchen table, beside his mug.

"I wrote you something," she said. "And I found something you wrote. I think you should have both."

He read hers first, all the way down, and then all the way down again. Then he unfolded the other one and went very still.

"Where did you find this?"

"The loft. I was looking for your reports. I wanted to prove you were rubbish too."

A sound came out of him that was nearly a laugh. "And was I?"

"Mostly Cs."

He laid the two letters side by side. The same fold, thirty years apart.

"I never gave it him," he said. "I was waiting till I could say it properly. Then he was ill." He looked across at the bureau. "I swore I'd never make anyone feel like that."

"You didn't shout," said Faye. "You just went quiet."

He did not argue.

They talked until the tea went cold, and not quite as father and daughter. More like two people who had turned up in the same small room, both fifteen in their own way. He told her about the maths teacher who used to read the marks out to the whole class. She fetched the sketchbook from the back of her wardrobe, and he turned the pages slowly and asked which ones she liked best. He said he had been frightened. Not of her failing. Of her having fewer doors open than she might, and of not knowing which ones he had closed himself.

"You could have just said," said Faye.

"So could you," said Rhys. "So could I, once."

The next morning there was an envelope propped against the cereal box. It had her name on the front in his sloping hand, and a first-class stamp in the corner, stuck on very straight, although it had only needed to come downstairs.

> *Sit with this:* Is there something you once needed to say to your own parent and never did? If a young person said something like it to you now, what would make it hard to hear?

83

The Bin Bag on the Table

Thea was eighteen, and she had lived in five homes since she was eight.

The last one, with Mrs Rowe, had lasted four years so far, which was longer than anything. Mrs Rowe had three cats, a laugh you

could hear from the street, and a rule that nobody went into anyone else's room without knocking, including her.

When the fostering service wrote to ask whether any of its care leavers would speak at the preparation course for new foster carers, Thea put the letter on the fridge under a magnet and left it there for a week. She thought about the social workers who had turned up at school in the middle of a lesson. She thought about all the meetings that had been about her, in rooms she was not in. Then she rang Ms Sandhu at the office and said yes, on one condition. She wanted to do it her own way.

The course was on a Tuesday evening in a church hall with a parquet floor and a radiator that clanked. There were twelve people on the plastic chairs: two couples, two dads together, a retired teacher, a young woman on her own with a notebook, and some others. There was tea in green cups on a trestle table and a flipchart nobody had written on yet.

Thea came in with a roll of black bin bags under her arm. She tore one off for each of them and handed them round. Then she tore off one more, shook it open and laid it on the trestle table among the cups, empty, and left it there.

"You've got five minutes," she said. "Someone's coming to take you somewhere else. You don't know where. You don't know how long for. Put in it what you'd take."

There was a little uncertain laughter. Then, slowly, they did it. Purses went in, and phones, and car keys. The young woman took a photograph out of her wallet and put it in on its own. One of the dads put in his reading glasses, then took them out again, then stood there holding the bag with nothing in it at all.

"Now carry it to the door," said Thea.

They did, shuffling, embarrassed, and stood in a line by the fire exit holding their bags, and she began.

She told them about the first move, when she was eight, and the bag splitting on the stairs, and her school shoes and her toy rabbit bouncing down to the bottom. The social worker had been in a hurry. One of the shoes was never found.

She told them about the second house, where she never took anything out of her bag, because what was the point. About the third, where the carer said "make yourself at home" and then got cross when she did. About the way you learn to listen through walls for your own name.

Then she told them about Mrs Rowe, who on the first night did not ask her a single question. She put a plate of chips in front of her and said, "I've cleared you two drawers and a shelf. They're yours. Nobody else goes in them."

"Two drawers," Thea said, and for a moment she could not go on. "I can't tell you."

The retired teacher was crying quietly into a tissue. The young woman with the notebook had stopped writing.

At the end, one of the dads asked, "What's the first thing we should say? When a child comes."

Thea thought about it. "Don't say much," she said. "Show them where the toilet is. Then show them what's theirs."

Afterwards, things changed in ways you could see. The service stopped letting children move with their belongings in bin bags, and bought in a stack of proper suitcases on wheels, in different colours, so a child could choose. Ms Sandhu asked whether Thea would come to every course, not as a favour but as part of the team, with a proper fee and a form to fill in with her name at the top.

For ten years Thea had been a placement, a case, an item on someone's agenda. Now people wrote down what she said.

On the hook in Mrs Rowe's hallway, among the keys and the dog lead and the cat harness that no cat had ever agreed to wear, there now hung a lanyard with her photograph on it, and underneath, in blue capitals, the word TRAINER.

Sit with this: Who near you has lived through something the rest of us only make plans about? What would it take for them to be asked to teach it?

84

One True Thing at Tea

Jackie was seventeen when the bed came. It arrived on a Tuesday in two flat boxes, and two men from the hospice put it together in the front room, with the dining table folded away against the wall, and her dad sat in his armchair by the window making jokes about the handset that tilted it up and down.

After that the house went quiet in a new way.

Every evening her mum, Beverley, said, "Dad's had a good day," in a bright voice that did not sound like hers. Her brother Gethin, who was twelve, had his headphones on from the minute he came in from school until the minute he went to bed. When her mum was out of the room, her dad, Alan, said, "Don't go upsetting your mum with questions, love. She's got enough on." And on the stairs her mum said, "Don't go tiring your dad."

So nobody asked anybody anything. They were all being kind. It was like living in a house where everyone was holding their breath.

The nurse came on Mondays and Thursdays. Her name was Jo Pennock. She was small and grey-haired and wore trainers with her uniform.

One Thursday in February, Jackie followed her out to the car.

"Can I ask you something?"

Jo put her bag down on the roof. "Go on."

"Is he dying?"

There was a pause, not a long one. "Yes, love. He is."

Jackie had known. Knowing it and hearing it were different. She held on to the cold edge of the car door.

"How long?"

"I can't give you a date. Nobody can. But I can tell you what to look for. He'll sleep more. He'll eat less, and that's all right. It isn't him giving up. It's his body needing less. When things start changing day by day instead of week by week, that's when it's getting close."

"Does it hurt him?"

"Sometimes. That's what the little pump by his bed is for, and keeping on top of it is my job. If you ever think he's hurting, you ring the number on the front of the folder, day or night. You don't wait to be sure."

Jackie nodded. Then she asked the thing she had really come out for. "Does he know?"

"I think he does." Jo looked at her. "Have you asked him?"

"Mum says not to upset him."

"And I'd guess he's told you not to upset your mum," said Jo gently. "It's very common. Everyone protecting everyone. It's done out of love. But I'll tell you what I've seen, in a lot of front rooms. Afterwards, people hardly ever wish they'd said less."

"What do they wish they'd said?"

"Small things, mostly. Thank you. Sorry. I love you. Do you remember when." She opened her door. "You don't need a speech. Somebody just has to go first."

She drove off. Jackie stood on the pavement until her feet were cold.

That evening it was cheese on toast. Since the bed came, the three of them had been eating in the kitchen while her dad dozed. Jackie picked up her plate and carried it through to the front room and sat on the end of his bed. He opened his eyes.

"Mum," she called. "Gethin. Bring yours in here."

They came, puzzled, holding their plates. Gethin had one ear of his headphones off.

"I asked the nurse," she said. "She told me the truth. You're dying, Dad."

Her mum said, "Jackie," sharply, and then nothing else.

Her dad looked at the three of them, one after another. "She's right, Bev," he said. "I didn't know how to say it to you."

Her mum sat down in the armchair with her plate on her knees and cried, properly, for the first time since Christmas. Her dad held out his hand and she took it. Gethin took his headphones off altogether and put them on the floor.

"She said people wish they'd said things," said Jackie. "Small things. So we're going to say one true thing at tea. Every night. I'll go first." She swallowed. "Do you remember when you taught me to ride my bike on the rec, and let go of the saddle, and didn't tell me?"

Her dad smiled. "You went all the way to the swings."

"I was furious with you."

"I know. I was so proud I had to sit down on the bench."

After that it was every night. Her mum said she had been frightened since October and pretending she wasn't. Her dad said sorry for the year he worked away. Gethin said, red to the ears, that it was him who broke the shed window, not the wind, and her dad laughed until he had to stop and get his breath back.

By March he was sleeping most of the day, and eating hardly anything. They still brought their plates in.

On the last Thursday he barely woke at all. Nobody told Gethin what to do. He put his plate down on the windowsill, sat on the edge of the bed, took his dad's hand in both of his, and said, "Thanks for all the goals in the garden."

And his dad's thumb moved, once, slowly, across the back of his hand.

Sit with this: When a young person asks you a straight question about something hard, what makes you want to soften it? Who in your house might be waiting for someone else to go first?

85

Watch the Water

Brendan was sixteen when he started on the beach, and on his first morning Mrs Tully told him the rule.

She had been a lifeguard on that long stretch of north Cornish sand for twenty-seven years. She had a face like a walnut and a voice that could reach the far rocks without seeming to be raised. At the start of every shift, before the flags went up, before any radios or

rescue boards or chat, whoever was on the tower sat for twenty minutes and watched the sea. No binoculars. No phone. No talking. Just the water.

"What am I looking for?" Brendan asked.

"Nothing," said Mrs Tully. "You're looking at it. What's it doing?"

"It's wet," said Brendan.

She did not laugh. She looked at her watch.

For weeks he hated it. The sea went in and the sea went out. Gulls stood about on the sand looking cross. Families arrived with windbreaks. A man walked the length of the beach in a pair of shorts that should not have been allowed. Brendan's friends were working in the surf shop in town, where at least there was music.

But without meaning to, he began to notice things. How the surfers drifted, always the same way, by the end of a set. How the colour of the water changed when a cloud went over. How the waves broke differently at low tide, further out and lazier.

On the August bank holiday the beach was the fullest he had ever seen it. The flags were up, red and yellow, and the safe stretch between them was packed with bodyboards and toddlers and grandads with their trousers rolled. Brendan sat his twenty minutes, half bored, half watching a kite.

And then something bothered him.

To the left of the flags, not far from where a few families had wandered with their buckets, there was a patch where the waves were not breaking. Everywhere else the white water came rolling in. There, it was flat. Darker. A bit rippled on top, like the skin on cold custard. A line of foam and seaweed was moving slowly out, the wrong way, towards the open sea.

It looked like the calmest bit of the whole beach. That was why the families were drifting towards it.

He did not know why it bothered him. He only knew it did. "Mrs Tully," he said. "That bit's wrong."

She looked for about two seconds. Then she was on the radio, and the flags were being moved, and she was sending him down the

sand to tell the families to come back between them. Sixteen, in a red top, telling grown men with tattoos to pick up their windbreak and move along. Some of them were not pleased.

Twenty minutes later a lad on a bodyboard who had not seen the flags move paddled straight into that flat dark water and was carried out past the rocks in less time than it takes to tell. They had him back on the sand in four minutes, coughing and frightened and fine, because they had been watching that exact spot already.

Afterwards, with the board stowed and the lad's mum still shaking, Mrs Tully sat down next to Brendan on the tower.

"What was it doing?" she said.

He thought about it. "Nothing," he said. "That's what was wrong with it."

She patted the rail beside him and went to write it up in the log.

Three summers later Brendan was nineteen and senior on the tower, and the new trainee was a girl of sixteen called Yvonne, who chewed gum, checked her phone when she thought nobody was looking, and found the whole idea of sitting still for twenty minutes deeply insulting.

On her first morning he did not explain the rule. He just sat down on the tower, looked at the sea and kept his mouth shut.

She lasted three minutes. "Are we just going to sit here?"

"Twenty minutes," said Brendan.

"What for?"

He heard it coming before he said it, in a voice that was not quite his own. "What's the water doing?"

She rolled her eyes and folded her arms and looked.

Brendan waited. He waited through a jet ski, and a dog chasing a ball into the shallows, and Yvonne's sighs. He did not help.

In the twelfth minute she sat up a little.

"Why's that bit flat?" she said.

Sit with this: Is there a slow habit someone once gave you that you now hear yourself passing on?

86

Lengths

Miranda was twenty-one, finishing a sport science degree, and qualified as a swimming teacher, and her mum could not swim a stroke.

It had never been said in so many words. But Miranda had been having lessons since she was five, paid for out of her mum's cleaning money, and she had swum for the club through all her teens, and at every single gala her mum had sat in the café upstairs, behind the steamed-up glass, in her coat, with a cup of tea she did not drink. Miranda used to look up between races and see her there, both hands round the cup, watching.

They lived on a low-rise estate in east London. The women on the estate came from Nigeria and Bangladesh and Poland and two streets away, and over the years Miranda had heard most of them say, one way or another, the same thing. They had never learned. There had been no pool, or no money, or no one to teach them, or they had been girls in a place where girls did not. Mrs Begum, three doors along, had grown up a mile from the sea and had never once been in it.

In the Easter holidays Miranda went to the leisure centre and asked the manager whether she could have the learner pool on Sunday mornings, seven till eight, for women only, at the cheapest rate he could do.

"You'll get three people," he said. But he gave it to her.

Eleven came the first week. Some had swimming costumes bought new for the purpose, still with the creases in. Some had borrowed. One wore leggings and a long T-shirt and stood at the top of the steps for twenty minutes before she put a foot in. Miranda did not hurry her.

Her mum came too. She said she was there to hold the towels. She sat on the bench by the wall, fully dressed, in her coat, holding the towels.

The second week she held the towels again.

The third week she came in a costume borrowed from Mrs Begum's daughter and sat on the edge of the pool with her feet in the water, kicking them very slightly, as if she were not.

The fourth week, when the others had gone to get changed and the lifeguard was stacking floats, she got in. She stood in the shallow end, up to her waist, holding the rail with both hands, and did not look at Miranda.

"I never told you," she said. "All those galas. I was frightened the whole time. Every race. I used to sit up there and think, if she goes under, I can't get her. I'd just have to watch."

Miranda stood in the water. Nothing she had learned on any course covered this.

"You don't say that to your child," her mum said. "You just pay for the lessons."

"You can say it to me now," said Miranda.

She taught her mum on Sunday mornings for the rest of that year, after the others, when the pool was quiet and the light came in long and pale through the high windows. Her mum was slow, and very hard on herself, and some weeks she got as far as the steps and turned round and went home. Miranda found she was more patient with her than she had ever been with anyone, even the five-year-olds.

The Sunday class kept going. By the autumn there was a waiting list. Two of the women from the first week began helping with the beginners, standing in the water beside them, saying the same things Miranda had said to them. In August, Mrs Begum went home to Bangladesh for a wedding and sent a photograph to the group chat: herself, in a green salwar kameez, standing in the sea up to her knees, holding her shoes in one hand and laughing.

In December Miranda taught her mum to float.

She stood beside her in the shallow end with one hand under the back of her head, the way she had once been held herself, and told her to look up at the ceiling and breathe. Her mum lay back, stiff as a plank at first, then less so. Her ears went under. Her hair spread out round her face.

Miranda moved her hand away, an inch at a time.

Her mum went on lying there, looking up at the ripples of light moving on the ceiling, breathing slowly in and out, not knowing she was holding herself up.

Miranda kept her hand a few inches below, just in case. She did not need it.

Sit with this: What have you been given the chance to learn that someone close to you never had? What might change if you brought it home to them?

87

The Teenagers Who Taught the Internet

A true story

In 2009, in Toronto, two high-school sisters, Kascha and Macaulee Cassaday, began a community service project.

It started close to home. They had been helping their own grandparents to use computers and the internet: the sort of patient, sitting-beside-you help that so many families know, when a grandparent wants to see the photographs or answer the message and the screen will not do what it is told. And the sisters began to wonder whether other older people might want the same help.

So they tried it. They began pairing teenage volunteers with older people living in a local residence, one to one. One young person, one older person, side by side at a screen. The teenagers taught them to send emails, to video-call their families, and to find their way around the web.

Anyone who has sat beside a grandparent at a keyboard will know something of what that asks. The young person has to slow right down and remember that nothing is obvious the first time. The older person has to be willing to get it wrong in front of someone a quarter of their age, and try again, and get it wrong again, and keep going. It takes patience on both sides of the screen.

It sounds ordinary, and it is unusual. Nobody had to invent a machine or raise a fortune. It needed young people willing to give an hour, older people willing to try, and someone to put them in the same room.

Most of us carry a picture of how learning works. The old teach, and the young learn. The grandparent shows the child how to knead dough, or tie a knot, or plant a bean. The teacher stands at the front. It is a good picture, and much that is precious has been handed down that way.

But here it was turned round. The teenagers were the ones who knew. The older learners were the ones being shown. And for that to work at all, something had to be true on both sides. The young had to believe they had something worth giving, which is not always easy at sixteen. The old had to believe they could still learn, which is not always easy at eighty.

The project was filmed by the sisters' older sister, Saffron Cassaday, and became a documentary, *Cyber-Seniors*, released in 2014. The film follows older learners, some of them in their eighties and nineties, and the teenagers who taught them. It follows them through frustration, and through laughter, and into friendships that nobody would have predicted: a teenager and someone four or five times their age, discovering that they had a great deal to say to each other.

What the young taught was a skill. What the old brought was everything else: their lives, their stories, their patience. Each generation held something the other needed, and in the meeting both were changed. The young found out they were worth listening to. The old found out they were not finished learning.

It did not stop with one residence, or one film. The project grew into a non-profit organisation, Cyber-Seniors: Connecting Generations, which continues to train young people as mentors to older adults.

That is the part I find most moving. Two sisters began by helping their own grandparents at home, the way countless young people do every week without thinking of it as anything special. They noticed something they could do, and something other people needed, and

they did not wait to be told they were old enough. What they found out, that the young can teach and the old can still learn, turned out not to belong only to their family. It belonged to everyone.

Nothing about it threw away the older picture of learning. The respect still runs from young to old. It has simply been widened, so that it runs both ways.

Somewhere tonight, very likely, a grandparent is waving at a screen at a grandchild on the other side of the world, because someone young once sat beside them and showed them which button to press.

Sit with this: What could a young person in your life teach you, if you let them?

88

Sylvia's Method

Sylvia was fifteen, and by the time she arrived at the learning centre in the old library building, she had been permanently excluded twice, both times for fighting.

She lived with her nan on an estate on the edge of a northern town, in a house with a trampoline in the garden that nobody had bounced on for years. Her file came ahead of her. It said she was aggressive, non-compliant and unable to concentrate.

Mr Kershaw taught maths at the centre. He was close to retiring, wore a tie every day whether anyone else did or not, and was as bald as an egg. He read the file before she came, all of it, because he always did. Then he turned it face down on his desk and left it there.

On her first morning he did not ask her about the fighting. He asked her, "What do people come to you for?"

She looked at him as if he had asked her to sing. "Nothing."

He asked again the next day, in exactly the same voice, as though it were the most ordinary question in the world. "Nothing," she said again.

But he had noticed her hands. They were never still. In every break she was doing something to her own hair or to somebody else's, quick and exact, without looking. On the Thursday, a younger girl came into the room at lunchtime with a comb and a pack of hair bands and a hopeful face, and Sylvia sat her on a chair and gave her cornrows, eight neat lines running straight back from her forehead, in under twenty minutes, while talking about something else entirely.

Mr Kershaw watched from his desk. When the younger girl had gone, he said, "How do you know where the lines go?"

Sylvia shrugged. "You just count."

"Will you show me the counting?"

She looked at him, and at his head, and for the first time since she had arrived something happened to her face that might have been the beginning of a laugh.

"I can't practise on you," she said.

"No," Mr Kershaw agreed. "I've been a disappointment to hairdressers for thirty years."

She laughed then, properly.

He found some balls of wool in the art cupboard and tied lengths of it to the back of a chair, and she showed him. Three strands. Four strands. How you part a head into sections so that they come out even on a surface that curves away from you in every direction. How many box braids it takes to fill a head, and how long each one takes, and so what you ought to charge, and why her cousin was charging too little. He asked questions. She answered them, impatiently and precisely. When he got it wrong, which was often, she took the wool off him and did it again and made him watch.

Then he asked her to draw it, so he would not forget.

The drawings were the first work anyone at the centre had seen from her. Diagrams of a head from above, divided into a grid, every part numbered. Arrows. Little sums in the corners, worked out in her own way, which was not the textbook way but always got to the right answer. Angles she had never been taught the names of.

Near the end of the half-term, she went into the room next door, where the younger group had their lessons, to fetch a pair of scissors. And she stopped.

On the wall, laminated, was one of her drawings. Above it, in Mr Kershaw's careful printing, it said *Sylvia's Method: dividing a curved surface*. All around it were the younger children's own attempts, in felt-tip, and lengths of wool plaited and tacked to the board with drawing pins.

She stood in front of it, scissors forgotten in her hand, until the bell went.

Mr Kershaw came in behind her. "I hope you don't mind," he said. "They got it quicker from yours than from mine."

She shrugged, which with Sylvia could mean almost anything, and went back to her own room and sat down. The next morning there was a new drawing on his desk, of a four-strand braid, with the angles labelled, and a note in the corner that said *this one is harder*.

She did not become a different person. She still had days when the world was too loud and she put her fist through things, or nearly. Some weeks she did not come in at all. Mr Kershaw did not pretend otherwise, and he was not the only one at the centre looking out for her.

But in the spring she enrolled at the college for hairdressing, and maths alongside it.

And on the back of a chair in Mr Kershaw's room there is still a length of yellow wool, plaited badly, that nobody has ever been allowed to throw away.

Sit with this: When you first meet a young person, what do you learn about them first, and where does it come from? What do people come to them for that nobody has thought to ask about?

89

Grace

Terence's dad had said grace before every evening meal for as long as Terence had been alive, and, according to his mum, for a good while before that.

They lived in a terraced house halfway up a valley in South Wales, with the hill going straight up behind the back yard. His mum taught at the primary school in the next village. His dad was a postman, out before six and finished by early afternoon, so it was his dad who did the cooking, which was mostly good and occasionally adventurous. Tea was at half past five, on the dot. And every teatime, when the plates were down and before anyone picked up a fork, he bowed his head and said the same few words, and Terence bowed his.

On Sundays they went up the road to chapel. Terence had liked it as a boy. The singing, mostly. There was a man in the back row who could make the windows hum.

At sixteen he began reading. Physics first, then the arguments, then the arguments about the arguments, late at night on his phone, and on the bus with his friend from school who was very certain about everything. By seventeen, he did not believe a word of it. Not in the way he was supposed to.

For months he went on bowing his head at tea. He mouthed along. He felt like he was lying to his dad twice a day, at the table and in chapel, and it sat in his stomach like a stone.

Then one Thursday, over sausage and mash, his dad put his hands together and began, and Terence said, "Dad. I can't do this any more."

He said the rest of it to his plate, fast. That he did not believe. That he was sorry. That he did not know what he did believe, only that it was not this, and he could not keep pretending.

His dad put his hands down on the table. Rain was ticking on the roof of the lean-to. The dog, under the table, shifted and sighed.

"Right," his dad said.

He got up and went upstairs.

Terence sat there with his tea going cold and thought, well, that's it, then. He could hear his dad moving about in the back bedroom, opening the cupboard where the old boxes were kept.

When he came back down he had a paperback in his hand. It was battered, the spine gone white, the cover half off. It was a book against God, a famous one, the kind Terence had been reading on his phone.

"I read this when I was nineteen," his dad said. He put it on the table between them. "I very nearly went the same way."

Terence opened it. The margins were full of pencil, small and furious. Underlinings. Question marks. *No. Says who? That's not fair and you know it.*

"Read it," said his dad. "Then read the ones that answer it. Then read whatever you like. I'd like to hear what you make of it all."

Terence turned the book over in his hands.

"I'm still going to say grace," his dad said. "You don't have to. But I'd like you at the table for it. If that's all right."

Terence nodded.

The next evening it was fish fingers. His dad put the plates down and bowed his head. Terence did not. He sat with his hands in his lap and waited, quietly, while his dad said the words, the same words, not hurried and not louder. Then they ate.

He stopped going to chapel after that. His dad did not ask him to. They argued instead, over tea, over the washing-up, in the car on the way to his nan's, and his dad was a better arguer than Terence had ever given him credit for. He did not give way an inch. Neither did Terence. Some evenings it got heated, and his mum, marking exercise books at the end of the table, would roll her eyes and take her plate into the other room.

The paperback stayed on the kitchen windowsill. Over that winter, beside his dad's old pencil, a second set of notes appeared in the margins, in blue biro, in a different hand. Some of them agreed with the pencil. Some of them did not.

And every evening the plates went down, and there were the two of them at the table in the yellow kitchen light, one head bowed and one not, and the steam going up off both plates the same.

Sit with this: Is there something a young person near you is afraid to say, in case it costs them their place at the table? What would they need to see to know it wouldn't?

90

Her Own Reins

Bradley was twenty, and he had worked at the riding school since he was fourteen, first mucking out for free rides, then as a groom, and now, in his first year qualified, teaching.

The yard was on a farm in Herefordshire, at the end of a lane with grass up the middle. It smelled of horses and wet straw and the woodsmoke from the farmhouse. It belonged to Margaret Garside, who was nearly seventy, had ridden all her life, and had one rule that she had drilled into Bradley until he could have recited it in his sleep. Nobody is ever made to go faster than they ask. The rider decides. You can help, you can advise, you can walk beside them every step of the way. But you never take the choice off them. Safety is the one thing that is never the rider's choice: the hat, the girth, the pony, and when a lesson has to stop. Those are ours.

One Saturday in March a mother brought her daughter, Agnes, for her first proper lesson off the lead rein. Agnes was ten, thin and serious, in a hat that came down over her eyebrows. Her mother was brisk and well-dressed and on her phone in the car park, and she told Bradley twice that Agnes was very sporty and would pick it up in no time. Agnes was busy with the strap of her hat. She stood by the mounting block, looking up at Dolly, the steadiest pony on the yard, as if Dolly were a cliff.

Bradley checked the girth, and the stirrups, and the strap on her hat. He told her exactly what he would be doing the whole time, and where he would be standing.

She walked Dolly round the school well enough. Then Bradley asked whether she would like to try a few strides of trot. She nodded, and gave a little squeeze with her heels, and Dolly broke into a trot, and Agnes bounced, and lost a stirrup, and grabbed the front of the saddle with both hands and froze. Dolly, being Dolly, slowed to a walk on her own and stopped.

Agnes sat there and began to cry.

Her mother was at the rail. "Come on, Agnes," she called. "Just sit up. You're fine. Keep going."

Agnes did not move.

Her mother turned to Bradley. "Can't you just take her on the lead and run her round once?" she said. "So she's done it. Otherwise she'll go home thinking she can't."

Bradley did not take his eyes off the girl on the pony. "I won't do that," he said. "Sorry."

"What do you mean, you won't?"

"It's her choice," he said. "She decides."

Then he walked over to Dolly's shoulder and said to Agnes, quietly, "You can walk on, or you can stay right here as long as you like, or you can get off. Any of those is fine. I'm not going anywhere."

The mother said a number of things about what the lessons cost and what she was paying for. A girl grooming at the next stable looked round. Bradley's neck went red. He stayed where he was.

Agnes wiped her face on her sleeve. "I want to get off," she said.

So she got off, and sat on the mounting block, and did not look at anyone.

Bradley did not tell her she had done well, or that she should have kept going. He loosened Dolly's girth a hole and stood with her, rubbing the pony's neck, and waited.

After a while Agnes stood up. "Can I just lead her round?" she said. "Walking. Not riding."

Nobody had suggested it. Bradley handed her the reins.

She led Dolly once round the school on foot, talking to her the whole way, too quietly for anyone else to hear. Then again. Then she

stopped at the mounting block and climbed back on and walked her round once more, and said that was enough for today.

The next week she walked. The week after, she asked for three strides of trot, and did them, and stopped, and asked for three more.

Three weeks later, on a grey Saturday with rain in the air, she trotted all the way round the school on her own, rising out of time with the pony and grinning so hard her hat slipped.

Her mother was at the rail. She had her hands round a takeaway coffee, and her phone was in her pocket, and for the whole of that circuit she did not call out a single word.

Sit with this: When have you wanted to take someone round the last bit, so they could say they had done it?

Things you might try

Ask what they know. This week, ask a young person in your life to teach you something they understand and you don't: a game, a song, a bit of science, how to fix the bike, how to edit a video. Then really learn it. Ask proper questions. Keep anything they write down for you, and use it. Few things tell a young person more clearly that their knowledge matters. If they find what they taught you still in use weeks later, so much the better.

Hand over the letter. If there is something you have been carrying about, unsaid, to a parent or to a child, try writing it down this week, as honestly as you can, and then giving it to them rather than keeping it in a drawer. And if a young person hands you something hard to read, read it all the way through before you say a word. Then ask them to tell you more.

Take time to look first. Before fixing a fault, an argument or a bad mood, try ten minutes of simply looking and listening. No advice, no tools, no phone. Ask yourself, "What's it doing?" You may be surprised how much shows itself. Then, when a young person is learning a skill alongside you, offer them the same ten

minutes. It may drive them mad. It may also be the most useful thing you ever hand on.

Keep their place at the table. If a young person tells you they no longer believe what you believe, about faith, politics or anything that matters to you, try keeping every ritual of love exactly as it was: the meal, the walk, the lift home, the place laid for them. Let them know you want to hear what they find. Belonging that does not depend on agreement gives a young person somewhere safe to come back to while they search.

Stay at their shoulder. When a young person freezes halfway through something, an exam, a driving test, a job, a hard conversation, resist the urge to take them round the last bit so they can say they have done it. Tell them they can rest, or stop, and that either is fine. Then wait. The courage they find for themselves is the courage they keep.

Your story

Think back to a day when someone younger turned round and showed you something. A grandchild steering your finger to the right button. A teenager who saw straight through a thing you had been staring at for years. Or perhaps you were the young one, and you can still feel how it was when an adult pushed the pen across and said, "Show me how." What did they learn from you? And what did you learn about yourself, being asked?

CHAPTER 11

The Circle Around Them

No one is held up by one pair of hands alone.

A station platform, early one Sunday in September. The train is late, and further along, a send-off is taking place.

The young woman at the centre of it is perhaps eighteen. She has a rucksack bigger than she is, a bag for life full of saucepans, and a duvet rolled up and tied with a dressing-gown cord. She is going somewhere far enough away that she will not be home at weekends. You can tell from the duvet.

Her mother is there, of course, holding the saucepans and being very brisk about it. But she is not alone. Beside her is a man in a football club tracksuit, the kind that says *Coach* on the back, who keeps checking the departures board as if he could make the train come by staring. There is an older woman in a hairdresser's tunic, who must have come straight from opening up the salon, and who presses something into the girl's hand and closes her fingers over it. There is a small, very upright old man in a tie, on a Sunday, holding a tin. There is a boy about her own age who says almost nothing and carries the duvet. And there is a woman who looks like a neighbour, in slippers, who has plainly walked down from a house nearby and had not meant to come all the way onto the platform.

Six people. They do not, by the look of them, know each other very well. They stand in a loose ring around her, slightly awkward, each of them holding a small piece of her life.

When the train comes, there is a scramble of hugs and bags. The tin goes into the rucksack. The coach says something that makes her laugh. The doors beep, and she is gone, a hand flat against the window.

And now watch the six of them. For a moment they stand on the platform not quite knowing what to do. Then the old man offers the tin round. The coach takes a piece of whatever is in it. The hairdresser says, "Well," and the neighbour in slippers says, "Well," and somehow they are talking to one another, and they walk out of the station together, still talking, as if they had always been one party.

It is a scene worth keeping. Somewhere between fifteen and twenty-one, the world of a young person widens faster than at any time since they first learned to walk. Friendships cross every line we were taught to draw. A boss, a coach, a teacher, a friend's mother, the man who runs the boat club, all begin to matter. It can leave a parent standing on the platform, holding the saucepans, wondering where everyone has gone.

But look at it the other way round. Every one of those six is there because of her. She has gathered them, mostly without knowing she was doing it. Each young person matters completely, on their own. And each of them belongs to something far larger than one family or one town. Those two facts are not rivals. They are the same fact, seen from two sides.

If you are a parent, you were never meant to do this alone. Let the others in. Their place does not take yours away. It extends it.

If you are a young person who has picked this book up off the kitchen table: you are allowed to choose some of your circle yourself. Look for the grown-ups who listen, who keep turning up, and who want good things for you without wanting to own you. And if you have no such circle, because you have been in care, or moved too often, or lost the people who would have stood around you, it can still be gathered. It is never too late.

The stories that follow are about that widening. In each of them, someone finds out that they are not standing on their own.

91

The Seam in the Oar

Seth was sixteen and lived with his grandad in a terrace above the estuary, in a town where the wind came up the river mouth sideways for half the year. His mum was in Leeds, mostly, and texted when her shifts allowed. His grandad had fished until the boats went, and now he sat in his chair by the window with a pair of binoculars on the sill and had opinions.

One of his opinions was about the families on the Travellers' site out past the caravan park. He did not shout about it. He said it the way he said that the tide would be in at four and the council were useless. "You keep away from that lot." Seth had heard it so many times he had stopped hearing it, which is not quite the same as not believing it.

What Seth cared about was the gig. The rowing club kept two long wooden boats in a shed by the slipway, six oars and a cox in each, and Seth had rowed in the junior crew since he was twelve.

In April a new lad turned up at Tuesday training. His name was Jude. He was fifteen, wiry, with black hair cut short at the sides, and he came from the site. He said almost nothing. Jan Penrose, who coached the juniors, looked at him and then at Seth and put Jude in the seat behind him. "You're steady," she told Seth. "He needs steady."

Seth did not feel steady. He rowed the whole session with the back of his neck prickling, and afterwards he walked home quickly and did not mention it.

The club had a rule that the boats were scraped and oiled before the season by whoever turned up on Saturday mornings. Mostly that meant Seth and an old man called Mr Trevail, who talked about varnish. That Saturday, at five to seven, Jude was sitting on the river wall outside the shed, waiting for someone with a key.

They worked on opposite sides of the hull. Seth sanded the way he always had, quick and a bit careless. On the other side he could hear Jude's paper going long and slow, and every so often stopping.

When Seth came round the bow he saw that Jude was running his fingertips along the planks with his eyes half shut, feeling for something.

"You're doing it with the grain," said Seth.

Jude shrugged. "You do it against, you tear it."

That was the most either of them said all morning.

Two weeks later Seth's oar split. It was the one he had always used, the one with the worn patch on the handle that fitted his hands. A crack opened along the shaft a foot above the blade, and Jan looked at it and shook her head. "That's had it. We'll order a new one. Six weeks, if we're lucky."

Jude picked it up. He turned it in the light from the shed door and ran his thumb down the crack.

"That's not had it," he said. "You could scarf that."

Jude explained, in about nine words, that you cut both sides of the break into a long shallow slope and glued in a new piece to match. His uncle did up old wagons, the painted ones with the curved roofs, and half of every wagon was mended wood.

The next Saturday Jude came with a length of pale ash from his uncle's workshop, a fine saw, and a small plane wrapped in a cloth as if it were something alive. He marked out the slope with a pencil and a steel rule. He made the first cut himself. Then he held out the saw.

Seth's cut wandered. Jude did not take the saw back. He put two fingers on the blade and steadied it, and the second half came out true.

They glued it and clamped it and left it a week. When the clamps came off, they planed the joint flush, and then both of them, without meaning to, ran a thumb down the seam at the same moment. Their thumbs bumped. Jude laughed first, a short surprised sound, and then Seth laughed too, and Mr Trevail looked up from his varnish and told them to get on with it.

From his window, Seth's grandad watched them carry the oar down the slipway.

"That the lad from the site?" he said, when Seth came in.

"Jude. He mended my oar. We did."

His grandad said, "Hm," and lifted the binoculars again. That was the whole of it, that day or later. Seth did not argue.

The first race of the season was on a grey June evening with the tide on the turn. Seth pulled stroke in the junior boat, and behind him, matching him exactly, was Jude.

The varnish on Seth's oar was dark and old, and in the middle of it ran a slanting seam of new pale ash. Every time the blade came out of the water, the seam caught the light.

Sit with this: What have the young people around you been taught about "that lot"?

92

Somewhere to Sit

The high street of Frances's town had a building society, two charity shops, a chemist, a bookmaker's, a bakery and a great many windows with whitewash on them. It had no benches. There had been one, years ago, by the bus stop. The council had taken it away because of what the letter called antisocial behaviour, which as far as Frances could work out meant people her age sitting on it.

She was seventeen. She lived with her mum in a terrace off the top of the hill, and her mum worked on the reception desk at the dentist's and was always slightly behind with everything. After college Frances and her friends had nowhere to go that did not cost money. So they sat on the low wall outside the old bank, and every few days the community support officer came along and asked them, quite nicely, to move on.

"Move on where?" said Frances, once.

He did not have an answer. He did not seem to like the question either.

She wrote to the town council. A polite letter came back. There was no budget for street furniture, and in the council's experience benches attracted the wrong sort of use.

"We're the wrong sort of use," said her friend Philippa, reading it over her shoulder. "Brilliant."

Frances might have left it there. But one afternoon in November she came down the hill and saw someone sitting on their wall. An old woman in a green quilted coat, with a shopping bag at her feet, sitting very upright with her eyes closed.

Frances stopped. "Are you all right?"

The woman opened her eyes. "Getting my breath back, love. It's the hill. I can do the hill or I can do the shops, but I can't do both without a sit-down in the middle."

Her name was Mrs Abbott. She was eighty-two. She walked down to the chemist once a week for her tablets, and halfway was where her legs gave out. There used to be a bench. Now there was the wall, if the young ones weren't on it, or the windowsill of the bookmaker's, which she did not like to be seen on. Her friend from chapel had stopped coming into town at all. "She gets a taxi to the doctor's and that's it. Two years she's not seen the high street."

Frances walked home very slowly that evening.

That Saturday she took a notebook and sat at the window table in the bakery for four hours with one cup of tea, and counted. Not young people. Anybody who stopped to rest. An old man with a stick, leaning on a postbox. A woman with twins in a double buggy, sitting on a shop step. A heavily pregnant girl, holding the railing by the bus stop with both hands. Two lads from her college, moved off the wall at half past three. Mrs Abbott again, on the bookmaker's windowsill, looking embarrassed.

By the end of the afternoon she had sixty-one people in her notebook. Philippa did the next Saturday and got seventy-four.

They wrote it up properly, with a map, a little dot for every person and a line for where they had come from. When you looked at it, the dots made a shape. They gathered at the bottom of the hill and outside the chemist, which were exactly the places where a person with tired legs would need to stop.

The town council met in an upstairs room above the library. Frances went with Philippa and the map, and with Mrs Abbott, who

had put on a brooch for the occasion and who, when one of the councillors began to talk about antisocial behaviour, turned to look at him so slowly and so steadily that he lost his place.

"I'm eighty-two," she said. "I'd like to sit down on my own high street. These girls counted for me."

The council agreed to six benches. In the minutes, Frances noticed, they were described as seating for elderly residents. She did not mind what they were called.

They went in that spring, plain wooden slats on iron legs, one at the bottom of the hill and one outside the chemist and the rest spaced out in between. The first week, Mrs Abbott brought her friend from chapel into town in a taxi, and they sat outside the bakery for an hour and watched everything go past.

On a Thursday after college, if you go past the chemist, you may see an old woman in a green coat sitting in the middle of a bench, with her shopping at her feet and a girl in a college lanyard on either side of her, and the end of the bench already worn pale where people put their hands to push themselves up.

Sit with this: Who might the young people notice, if they started counting?

93

Facing the Door

The message came on a Tuesday in March, while Warren was eating his sandwich in the van. He was nineteen, an apprentice joiner, and he read it three times with a mouthful he forgot to swallow.

It was from his birth mother.

He had not seen her since he was four. That autumn he had been taken into care and gone to a foster carer called Patricia, in a mill town at the top of a steep street, and in the spring he had gone to live with the couple who became his mum and dad, in a village forty miles away, with a dog. His birth mother was meant to see him on

Wednesdays, at a family centre with a blue door. Some Wednesdays she came. Then she stopped.

Now she wrote that she had been ill for a long time and was better. That she thought about him every day. That she would like to meet, if he would. Saturday, eleven o'clock, the café by the bus station in the mill town. She put a kiss at the end.

Two days later he told his dad, in the garage, while they were both pretending to sort screws.

"Do you want to go?" said his dad.

"Dunno. Yeah."

"Then I'll drive you. I'll sit in the car park. You won't even know I'm there."

He rang Patricia too. She was sixty-six now and still fostering, and she had sent him a card every birthday for fifteen years with a five-pound note in it, even after he had a job. "You're never too old for a fiver," she always said. She listened, and said, "Ring me after. Whatever happens." Not "good luck". He noticed that.

On Saturday he was in the café at twenty to eleven. He chose a table at the back, against the wall, facing the door. He put his keys on the table: van key, house key, and a wooden clothes peg gone grey with age, which had been on every keyring he had ever owned. He ordered a tea and did not drink it.

At eleven the door opened and it was a man with a pushchair. At ten past, two girls in football kit. At twenty past his phone buzzed. *On my way x.*

By quarter to twelve the tea was cold. He sent a message. *I'm here.* He rang, and it rang out. He rang again and it went straight to voicemail.

He found he had gone very still. His hands were cold. Every time the door opened, something in his chest stood up, and every time it was not her, it sat back down a little more heavily. It was the oddest feeling, as if he were not nineteen at all, but much smaller, and had been watching that door for a very long time.

At twenty to one his dad came in from the car park, sat down opposite, and ordered a bacon sandwich. He did not say anything

about her. He ate half the sandwich and pushed the plate across, and Warren ate the other half without tasting it.

"Can we go up the hill?" said Warren.

Patricia's street was as steep as ever. She opened the door before they knocked and did not ask anything. His dad took himself into the front room with the cat and the paper, which was his way of being tactful.

Across the kitchen window, strung between two cup hooks, was a washing line. Cardboard pictures in felt pen were pegged along it: a bowl, a school, a park, a bath, a moon. They belonged to a girl of five, out at her nan's for the afternoon. At the very end of the line was a peg with nothing on it.

Warren looked at it for a long time.

"She wanted an empty one," said Patricia. "In case. They all do, once I've told them about it."

He put his hand over his keys.

"She didn't come," he said.

"No," said Patricia.

"I'm nineteen. It shouldn't still..." He did not finish.

She put a mug in front of him. "I bet you sat with your back to the wall. Facing the door."

He stared at her. Then he laughed, a short, rough sound. "Yeah."

"You always did. Wherever I put you." She sat down. "That's not daft, love. That's somebody who's had to keep watch."

She did not tell him he should feel better.

Before he left, he took out his phone. He wrote a message, deleted it, and wrote another. *I waited till twenty to one. I'm glad you're better. I'm not going to sit and wait like that again. If you want to write to me properly, you can, and I'll read it.* He read it out to Patricia. She nodded. He pressed send.

There was no answer that night, or that month. There were nights afterwards when he lay awake and watched the ceiling as if it might open.

But his dad drove the forty miles home without the radio on, and his mum was at the kitchen door with the dog before the engine had

stopped, and at nine o'clock the phone rang. It was Patricia, ringing to say nothing much at all.

Sit with this: When an old hurt opens again for a young person, who are the people who simply keep turning up? Could you be one of them, without needing to make it better?

94

The Back Step

Eva was eighteen and worked Saturdays and three evenings a week at a bakery café by the big city station, the kind of place where the queue goes out of the door at eight in the morning and nobody in it has time to be kind. She lived with her mum and her little brother in a second-floor flat ten minutes' walk away, and she liked the job, mostly.

In February a new lad started. His name was Wilfred and he was sixteen, tall, polite, a bit stooped, as if he were trying to take up less room. He had a stammer. Not all the time. But it came for him on certain sounds, and it came worst when people were waiting.

At the till, people were always waiting.

On his third Saturday, at the height of the morning rush, a man in a suit asked for a cappuccino and Wilfred got stuck on the first sound. He stood there with his mouth trying, and the queue sighed, the whole length of it, the way a queue does. Someone at the back laughed. Eva, on the coffee machine, took the order off him and made it, and Wilfred said thank you without looking at her.

At the eleven o'clock break the staff room was full. It was a small room with a kettle, a table and a door onto the yard where the bins were. Wilfred had taken his sandwich out to the back step, as he always did.

And somebody had a video.

One of the counter staff had filmed it, the till, the stuck word, the sighing queue. It went round the table on her phone. Then the grill

cook, a big cheerful lad of twenty whom everybody liked, did an impression of it. He was good at impressions. People laughed. Then they laughed at the laughing, and somebody asked for the video again, and the phone went round a second time, and more people crowded round to see.

Eva sat with her tea and felt something cold in her stomach.

The back door was propped open with a bread crate. Wilfred was just the other side of it. He could hear everything. Everybody knew he could hear.

She thought about saying something. She thought about exactly what the grill cook would do with whatever she said, and how he did the rotas when the manager was away, and how nobody would look at her for a week. She had seen it happen.

She did not say anything. She picked up her mug and her packet of crisps, stood up, said, "I'm getting some air," and went out through the propped door and sat down on the back step next to Wilfred.

He did not look at her. She did not look at him. They looked at the bins.

"What's in that?" she said, nodding at his sandwich.

"Ch-cheese and p-pickle."

"Good choice."

That was all. She opened her crisps and offered him one, and he took it.

Behind them, in the staff room, the laughter went on for a little while. Then a chair scraped. The pot-washer, a small woman in her fifties who never said much to anyone, came out with her tea and lowered herself onto an upturned crate without a word. A minute later one of the girls from the counter came out too, with a yoghurt, and sat on the bottom step and talked about the telly.

Inside, the laughing thinned. It is hard to keep laughing at something when half of the people you were laughing with have gone to sit beside it.

Eva glanced back once. Through the doorway she could see the grill cook standing by the table with his phone in his hand. Nobody

was watching him any more. He looked at the phone, and then at the door, and then he put the phone in his pocket and turned the kettle on, with his back to them.

She does not know whether the video was ever deleted. She never asked. It was not a story where one person getting up from a table mends a whole kitchen, and the grill cook did not apologise, then or later.

But the next Saturday, in the rush, when Wilfred got stuck on "flat white" and the queue began to sigh, the pot-washer called across from the sink, loudly, "Take your time, love, they've all got legs," and the man at the front of the queue went pink.

And at the eleven o'clock break, Eva came out of the staff room with her tea to find the back step already full. Wilfred was in the middle with his sandwich. There were four people on the steps and two on bread crates, and somebody had brought out a packet of biscuits.

Inside, the staff room was empty, and the radio was playing to nobody.

> *Sit with this:* When a group your young person belongs to turns its attention on one person, what do you imagine they would do?

95

Everybody's Way

When Marcus was asked what he wanted for his eighteenth, he said he did not want a party in a hall with a DJ who played the same six songs. He wanted to cook Sunday dinner for the whole family.

His mum, Lorraine, put her fork down. "You can do toast," she said. "Sometimes."

"I've got four months."

"The whole family," said Lorraine, "is nineteen people. Twenty if your Uncle Delroy brings the new girlfriend."

But the word was out, and in that family a word did not stay in one house for long. By the following Saturday Marcus had a timetable. Nobody had asked him whether he wanted one.

Auntie Pearl, his mum's eldest sister, would do the rice and peas, because nobody else could be trusted with it. Auntie Gloria, who had married into the family from Barbados forty years ago and still said so, would do the macaroni pie. Uncle Delroy would do the chicken, out the back, on the oil-drum barbecue he had made himself and would talk about at length. Grandad Lloyd would do the fried dumplings. And Auntie Maxine from next door, who was not related to anyone and had been everybody's auntie for thirty years, said she would do the carrot juice, with nutmeg and condensed milk, and would hear no argument.

So every Sunday that spring Marcus went round the family with a notebook.

Auntie Pearl stood him at her cooker and made him soak the kidney beans overnight, and taste the pot, and taste it again. "Thyme, a sprig. Spring onion. Pimento, five. And the scotch bonnet goes in *whole*," she said, holding it up like a tiny lantern. "You never, ever burst it. Burst it and your Grandad is on the floor."

Auntie Gloria, the following week, asked what Pearl had told him, listened with her lips pressed together, and then said, "Hmm. Tinned coconut milk. Well. That's one way." She used a block of creamed coconut grated on the fine side of the grater, and made him write that down in capitals.

Uncle Delroy taught him the marinade in a washing-up bowl and spent forty minutes on the oil drum, including how he had cut the air holes with a borrowed angle grinder in 1996. Grandad Lloyd, who was eighty-one and moved slowly round his kitchen in his slippers, taught him the dumplings with his big hands over Marcus's on the dough. "Not too much. You knead it to death, it dies." Auntie Maxine taught him the carrot juice in about four minutes and then gave him two hours of advice about girls, which he had not asked for.

Each of them, separately, at some point, asked him what the others had been teaching him, and tutted.

By the end Marcus had a notebook full of rules that contradicted each other. He decided, privately, to do all of them at once and hope.

The Sunday after his birthday, nineteen people came, and the new girlfriend made twenty. There were chairs borrowed from Auntie Maxine and from the church hall, and a pasting table in the front room with a cloth over it, and cousins on the stairs with plates on their knees. The kitchen was so full of aunties offering to help that Lorraine stood guard in the doorway and turned them back one by one, like a bouncer.

Marcus cooked for five hours. The macaroni pie came out golden. The chicken was nearly right, and Delroy said it was perfect, and then quietly told everyone it was nearly right. Grandad Lloyd ate four dumplings and said nothing at all, which from him was a speech. The bottom of the rice caught. Marcus scraped at it in horror, until Auntie Pearl looked into the pot over his shoulder and said the crispy bit was the best bit, everybody knew that, and fought Delroy for it with a serving spoon.

And then there was the moment. Every aunt in the house had come to the kitchen doorway to watch, because they all knew it, and Lorraine let them through. Marcus took the lid off the rice and peas, steam in his face, and went in carefully with a spoon, round the edge and under, the way Pearl had shown him.

He lifted it out.

The scotch bonnet sat in the bowl of the spoon, shining, red and whole, not a split in it.

Auntie Pearl clapped her hands together. Auntie Gloria said, "Well," and then, grudgingly, "Well done." Auntie Maxine began to sing something from church. Uncle Delroy whooped so loudly that a neighbour two doors down looked out of her window.

And Marcus stood in the middle of the crowded kitchen, in his mum's apron, holding the unburst pepper high above his head on a wooden spoon like a cup he had won, while twenty people who had

each given him one small piece of the dinner cheered him as if he had made all of it himself.

Sit with this: If the young person you know asked each of the grown-ups around them to teach them one thing, who would they go to first?

96

Two Lines on the Green

Reece was seventeen and six weeks into an apprenticeship with the council parks team, and he was fairly sure he was about to lose it.

It was not the work. He loved the work. He loved the smell of cut grass at half past seven in the morning, and the way a flower bed looked once it had been edged, sharp as a new haircut. He loved being outside all day, moving, which was the opposite of school, where he had spent eleven years being told to sit still.

It was the mornings in the depot. Every day at half seven the supervisor, Mr Lusk, stood by the rota board with a mug in one hand and read out the day. "Reece, you're with the mower crew at Victoria Park, then the bins on the riverside walk, then the shrub border by the war memorial wants cutting back, mind the roses, and get the leaf blower back to stores by three because the cemetery team have got it booked, and don't forget your timesheet." Then he handed out the job sheets, a typed page each.

By the time Mr Lusk got to the war memorial, Reece had lost the riverside walk. By the time he got to the timesheet, Reece was thinking about the mower. He had been told he had ADHD when he was fourteen, and he knew what it meant for him: not that he couldn't listen, but that a long string of words went into his head like water into sand. He could read the job sheet perfectly well. He just could not make it stay in order. He would start one job, see another, start that, and at three o'clock find three things half done and the leaf blower still in the van.

"Did you not hear me?" said Mr Lusk, the second time the cemetery team came looking for the blower. Then, a week later, "Were you listening at all?" Then, at the end of week six, quietly, in the office: "I'll be straight with you, son. Your review's at the end of the month. I can't carry someone who doesn't finish."

Reece said he would try harder. He had been saying that since he was seven.

That Friday he was sent to help the head groundsman on the bowling green at Victoria Park. Dafydd was sixty-one, with a grey beard and forearms like rope, and he had looked after that green for twenty-eight years. He did not say much.

Reece stood by the shed and waited for the list.

It did not come. Dafydd looked at him for a moment, then said, "Come here," and set off across the green. It was early. The grass was grey with dew, and his boots left a line of dark prints behind him. At the far side he stopped and pointed to where the turf had crept out over the boards into the ditch.

"That. All the way round. Like this."

He knelt, took the half-moon edger, and did a yard of it, slowly, so Reece could see the angle of the blade. Then he handed it over and walked back along his own footprints to the shed.

Reece did the whole edge. It took him two hours, and he did not look up once. When he had finished, Dafydd came out, walked the length of it, nodded, and said, "Right. Now this," and showed him the next thing.

It went like that all day. One job. Walked to, shown, handed over. Nobody asked him whether he had been listening. At four o'clock Reece realised that he had finished everything he had started, for the first time in six weeks, and that he was tired in a good way, the way of a day's work, and not in the usual way, the way of being scrambled.

He was back on the green on Monday. Dafydd had asked for him.

Nobody made a speech about it. But Reece began to notice things. Mr Lusk still read the day out at half seven, but now he stopped after Reece's name and said, "Dafydd'll walk you through

it." Then one of the mower crew, a big quiet man called Ivan, started doing the same out on the riverside walk: "This bit first. Come and look." Then the woman who ran the stores began tying a single brown luggage label to the leaf blower: *BACK BY 3*. One label, one thing. The forgetting did not go away. It just stopped being the only thing anyone saw.

He passed his review. Mr Lusk signed it on the depot table and said, "Should have done it that way from the start, shouldn't we," which Reece understood was as close to an apology as he was going to get. The training provider's assessor, when she next came, wrote the walking-through and the labels into his plan, so they would not depend on who was on shift.

Near the end of his second year a new apprentice started, a lad of sixteen called Vic, white in the face on his first morning and holding his job sheet as if it might go off.

Reece looked at him. Then he said, "Come here," and set off across the bowling green, early, with the grass still grey.

Behind them on the wet lawn ran two lines of dark footprints, one long and steady, and one hurrying to keep up.

Sit with this: Is there a young person near you who hears "Were you even listening?" more than anything else? What do you think they would say, if someone asked them how they work best?

97

The Review That Listened

A true story

There are children who grow up in the care of the state, because for one reason or another they cannot live with their own families. For generations, many of them have been described, in the main, by what was written about them: their files, their placements, their legal status.

In 2016, the First Minister of Scotland commissioned an independent review of the country's care system: the whole set of arrangements by which Scotland looks after children who cannot live with their families. It was called the Independent Care Review, and it was led by Fiona Duncan.

The Review did something unusual. It did not begin with the procedures, or with the rule books, or with the people who ran the system. It began by listening.

Over three years, it listened to more than 5,500 voices. That alone would have made it large. But the remarkable thing was whose voices they were. More than half of them belonged to care-experienced people: children and young people who were living in care at the time, and adults who had grown up in it.

People who had so often been talked about were, this time, the ones doing most of the talking. And the people in charge were the ones being asked to listen.

The Review's conclusions were published in February 2020. They were called The Promise.

What is striking about The Promise is where it begins. It does not begin with systems. It begins with what a child needs, and it puts it plainly: children should "grow up loved, safe and respected".

None of those words is complicated. Most parents would say them without thinking, standing at the school gate. But for a whole country to write them down as the foundation of how it cares for its children, and to say that they came first, before the procedures, was something new.

The Scottish Government committed itself to keeping The Promise.

In July 2020, an independent body was set up to oversee the changes, and it took the same name: The Promise. One of the rules written into it was that at least half of its members must have lived experience of the care system. Those who had grown up inside the system would be sitting at the table where its future was decided, as of right.

Its route map runs to 2030.

It would be easy to tell this as a story with a neat ending, and it is not one. Changing the way a nation cares for its children is slow, and the work is not finished. The Review never claimed it would be quick, or easy, or that writing a promise down is the same as keeping it. Anyone who has made a promise to a child knows the difference.

But something had shifted. For generations, the usual order of things had been that the adults decided and the children were told. In Scotland, for those three years, the order changed. The young were heard first. A whole country, through its government and those it asked to lead the work, chose to be taught by the people it was meant to protect.

There is a quiet lesson in that for every family, every school, every foster carer and every social worker, wherever they are. Beneath every case number, every file, every report, there is a person. They have a voice. And very often, if they are asked properly and listened to properly, they know better than anyone what they need.

The circle around a child can be a grandmother, a neighbour, a mentor or a teacher. Sometimes, it turns out, it can be a whole nation, learning to sit down and listen.

> *Sit with this:* When decisions are made about a young person in your care, are they in the room? What might they tell you, if they were asked first?

98

Sixth School

The new girl arrived in the second week of October, which at Rhian's school was the wrong time for anybody to arrive. The friendship groups had set like jelly in Year 7. By Year 10 you could have turned the whole year upside down and shaken it, and nobody would have fallen out of place.

Her name was Toni. She was fifteen and tall, with her hair scraped back so tight it looked painful, and she sat where she was put, answered when she was asked, and otherwise kept her head

down. By the end of the first week somebody had found out that her dad was in the Army, at the camp up the road, and that this was her sixth school in eight years.

"Army kid," said Gina, at lunch. Gina had been Rhian's best friend since they were five. "Don't bother learning her name. She'll be gone by Easter."

Rhian laughed. Everybody laughed. It was the sort of thing Gina said, and it was quite funny, and it was probably true.

Rhian captained the netball team. They were good that year, top of the county league by half-term, and the only weak spot was goal attack, where Hayley played because nobody else would and missed most of what she threw. One wet lunchtime Rhian went into the sports hall to fetch a bag and found Toni alone at the far post with a ball from the cupboard, shooting. She did not move her feet. She just lifted, let go, and the ball dropped through. In the whole minute Rhian stood in the doorway, she did not miss once.

"You should come to training," said Rhian. "Tuesdays."

Toni caught the ball and held it. "No, thanks."

"You're really good."

"I know." She said it without any pride, the way you might say you had brown eyes. "I was in the team at my last school. And the one before. You get picked, you get your bib, you learn everyone's name, and then the posting comes through and you're handing the bib back in at the PE office. I'm not doing it again." She threw, and it went in. "No offence."

Rhian told the others at training. Gina rolled her eyes. "Told you. She thinks she's too good for us. And she's off at Easter, so what's the point?"

Several people laughed. Rhian found that she did not. She stood there holding a cone, and it seemed to her quite suddenly that Toni was not too good for anything. She had simply worked out the cost of things more exactly than any of them had ever needed to.

"The point," said Rhian, "is that she's here now."

It was not a big thing to say. But Gina looked at her as if she had changed sides, and in a way she had. Gina sat somewhere else at

lunch the next day, and the day after. Rhian spent a fortnight eating her sandwiches with people she barely knew, feeling foolish, and missing her friend more than she would have admitted to anyone.

She asked Toni again. Then again. The third time Toni said, "If I come, don't give me a bib."

She came in her own grey T-shirt and played three weeks of practice matches without a bib at all, while the coach, Mrs Kendrick, tried not to look as if her prayers had been answered. Then one Tuesday Hayley, who had never wanted the position in the first place, pulled the GA bib over her head and held it out.

Toni looked at the bib, and at Hayley, and at the bib again. Then she put it on.

They won the county league in March. Gina came round slowly, the way people do: first standing near them at lunch, then sitting, then one day saying to Toni, "Your shooting's actually quite annoying," which from Gina was a sort of welcome.

The posting came through at the start of July. Cyprus, Toni said, flatly. Three weeks' notice, and the move would come with the end of term.

On her last day she went to the PE office to hand the bib back. Mrs Kendrick would not take it. "That's yours," she said. "We'll find another GA bib in the spare bag." And that afternoon, in the changing room, the other eleven girls in the squad took a black marker and wrote their names inside it, where nobody else would ever see.

On the Saturday the removals lorry came, the whole team was standing on the pavement outside the married quarters at eight in the morning, in the rain, in their bibs. Gina had made a banner out of an old bedsheet. It said *TONI* and nothing else, because she had run out of time.

Toni came out of the house carrying a box of kitchen things, saw them, put the box down on the wet path, and stood there.

The lorry pulled away. The family car followed it. And from the back window, all the way to the corner, a red bib flapped in the rain, *GA* on the front, and eleven names on the inside.

Sit with this: When the group your young person belongs to has already decided someone is not worth the bother, what would it cost them to say so? And who would stand beside them if they did?

99

Level Ground

Every Saturday for three years, Ronan and Zac and the others had gone to the skate park behind the leisure centre. It was not much of a skate park: a bowl, two ramps, a rail somebody had bent, and a low wall where they sat between goes and ate chips and said things that seemed hilarious at the time. Ronan was the worst on a board of any of them. Zac was the best.

The summer they were both seventeen, Zac bought a second-hand motorbike with his savings from the car wash. In August, on a wet bend on the bypass, a van pulled out. Zac was in hospital for three weeks and then in a spinal injuries unit for four months. The injury was low in his back. The doctors were honest with him: he would not walk again, and he would use a wheelchair from now on.

At first they visited in a crowd, with sweets and bad jokes, sitting on the end of a bed on a ward full of men three times their age. Zac laughed in the right places. Then the visits got shorter. Then he stopped answering the group chat. Then he stopped answering anyone.

He came home in January to a house that had been changed around him: his bed in what had been the front room, a wet room where the downstairs toilet used to be, a ramp of grey metal up to the front door. On the first Saturday, Ronan knocked. Zac's mum opened the door, looking tired, and said, "He says he's not up to it, love. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," said Ronan. "I'll come next week."

He did. And the week after. The answer was the same, or there was no answer at all, or the curtain in the front room moved slightly

and nothing else happened. The others came the first few times and then stopped. It was awkward on the doorstep. It made them feel as if they had done something wrong, and none of them knew what.

"What's the point?" said Sian one Saturday at the skate park. "He doesn't want to see us."

Ronan had been asking himself the same thing. He sat on the wall and looked at the bowl, and the steps up to it, and the gravel path from the road, and for the first time he saw it the way Zac would have to see it. There was no way in. Not without someone carrying you.

"Maybe he doesn't want to see us here," he said.

He did not have a better idea than that for a while. He just kept knocking. Sometimes Zac's mum said, "Wait there," and went in, and came back and shook her head. Then one Saturday, through the front-room door, Ronan heard Zac say, quite clearly, "Tell him to stop coming."

He went home and lay on his bed and thought about it. It was the first thing Zac had asked for in months. The next Saturday he did not knock. He sat on the wall at the end of Zac's road for ten minutes, feeling stupid, and then sent a message instead.

I won't knock any more. You asked. If you ever want me to, or want a different day, or want me to come and not talk, just say. I'll keep my phone on.

Nothing came back that day, or the next. On the Wednesday, late, his phone buzzed.

Not the door. Text first. Saturdays is fine. I might say no.

Deal, Ronan sent.

So every Saturday morning he texted one word, *Saturday?*, and most weeks the answer was *no*, and once it was *not today, head's bad*, which was more than Zac had said to anyone since August. Ronan kept to it. He did not turn up unasked.

It was Marie who found the car park. Behind the parade of shops at the end of Zac's road there was a carpet warehouse that had closed down, and its customer car park was huge and flat, resurfaced the year before it shut, and completely empty. You could see the near end of it from Zac's front window.

So on the first Saturday in March nobody went to the skate park. Five of them turned up at the empty car park instead, with their boards and a speaker and a bag of cones borrowed from somebody's little brother, and laid out a course across the smooth tarmac. It was useless for skating. There was nothing to drop in from and nothing to grind. They skated it anyway, badly, for three hours.

That morning Ronan had added a few lines under his usual word. *Saturday? We've moved. Old carpet place car park, end of your road. Flat all the way. No need to come, just so you know where we are.*

ok, Zac sent. Nothing else.

They did it again the next week. And the next. Ronan still texted first, and Zac still answered *no*, or *ok*, and never came.

On the fourth Saturday, at about eleven, Sian stopped dead in the middle of a turn and said, "Ronan."

Coming along the pavement, slowly, pushing himself with his jaw set, was Zac. He stopped at the edge of the car park. His shoulders were broader than they had been. For a long, awful moment nobody moved.

Then Ronan skated over, fell off right in front of him, and lay flat on his back on the tarmac.

"You're still the worst," said Zac.

"I know."

Zac looked at the cones for a while. Then he pushed off, hard, wove through all six of them without touching one, spun round at the end, and tipped himself back onto his rear wheels and held it there, balanced, the small front wheels in the air, the way the physios had taught him in the unit.

"Show-off," said Ronan, from the ground.

The others had started counting out loud. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. And Zac sat in the thin March sunshine, perfectly still on his back wheels, in the middle of all that flat grey ground, and grinned.

> *Sit with this:* Is there a young person you know who has gone quiet? What kind of contact might they be able to say yes to, and is the place you keep asking them to come somewhere they can actually reach?

Things you might try

Widen the circle on purpose. Sit down, perhaps with your young person, and write down the names of the trustworthy adults in their life: relatives, teachers, a coach, a neighbour, an old family friend. If the list feels short, think about who could be invited a little closer. Let these people in, and see their place as an extension of yours, not a rival to it. You might even ask each of them to teach your young person one thing they know how to do. And if the young person you care for has moved often, or been in care, ask them who they remember: the foster carer who sent a card, the teacher who stayed in touch, the auntie they lost track of. A circle that has scattered can often be gathered again, one name at a time.

Give them something to make together. If a young person you know has been taught to see some group of people as "them", arguing rarely helps. Shared work often does. A boat shed, a Saturday spent counting who needs somewhere to sit, a netball court: find a place where young people from different worlds can make something side by side, and let the work do the talking.

Talk about the staff room before it happens. Many young people will, at some point, be in a room, at work, at school or on a phone, where everyone turns on one person. Choose a calm moment, not a crisis, to talk about it. Let them know that they never have to join in, that getting up and going to sit beside the person is a real choice, and that they can always tell you without being blamed or losing their phone. If they are the one being targeted, or they see something that frightens them, help them write down what happened, and talk together about which grown-up they would tell: a manager, a teacher, someone they trust. Thank them when they tell you. And if they were the one laughing, help them see that they can stop, even when it costs them a friend for a while.

Keep turning up. If you have made a promise to a young person, keep it, especially when it is not returned. Send the card every birthday. If they ask you to stop knocking, stop, and ask what

kind of contact they could manage instead: a text, a set day, a visit with no talking. Then keep to what you agreed. Offer company before questions: a lift, a seat in the car park, one job at a time, walked and shown. And if they will not come to you, ask whether the place you keep meeting is one they can reach. The plainest kind of protection is simply being there, again and again, until a young person learns what it is to be waited for.

❧

Your story

Think back to when you were sixteen or seventeen. Who stood around you, besides your family? A coach, a neighbour, a boss on a Saturday job, a friend's mum who always set an extra plate. Someone who texted every week and never pushed.

Picture them on a station platform, holding a small piece of your life. Which of them never knew how much they mattered?

And look at the young people near you now. Whose platform might you be standing on?

CHAPTER 12

Free to Go

The thread does not break when they go. It only grows long enough to reach wherever they are.

Early on a September morning, a small ferry waits at the end of a harbour wall, the kind with one bench and a tub of geraniums that somebody waters faithfully and nobody thanks. It is a little after six. There are only two people on the wall: a man in a work fleece and a girl of about eighteen with a rucksack nearly as tall as she is.

He is checking things. That is the first thing you would notice. He asks whether she has her ticket, and she shows him. A few minutes later he asks again, and she shows him again, without a sigh, which is generous of her. He asks about her charger. He asks whether she has eaten. Then he takes a foil parcel out of his fleece pocket, sandwiches by the look of it, and she tucks them into the top of the rucksack, on top of everything else, as if they were the most important thing she was carrying.

After that there is nothing left to check, and they stand side by side looking out at the water, the way people do when they have run out of small things to say and the large thing is too large.

The ferry sounds its horn. She hugs him quickly, one-armed, the rucksack swinging, and goes up the gangway. He stands where she was. As the ferry pulls away he lifts his hand, not very high, and keeps it there until the boat has gone round the point.

Stay on that harbour wall a little longer and you would see what happens afterwards. He does not go back to his car. He sits down on the bench and takes out his phone and looks at it. After a minute or two it buzzes. He reads whatever it says and laughs out loud, alone

on the harbour wall at a quarter past six in the morning. Then he wipes his eyes with the heel of his hand and goes home.

Nobody else will ever know what the message said. Something about the sandwiches, perhaps. Something ordinary, sent from a moving boat, that told him she was gone and also that she was not.

If you have a young person in your life between fifteen and twenty-one, you have probably stood on some version of that harbour wall already, or soon will. These are the leaving years. They are full of forms and arguments, first wages and last exams. And underneath the noise something quieter is going on. A young person is beginning to find out not only what they are good at, but what they want to give, and to whom.

Every life has its own note, the way every bell in a tower has its own. In these years it begins to sound. You cannot choose it for them. You can only listen for it, and know it when you hear it, even when it comes from somewhere you were not expecting: a workshop instead of a lecture hall, a care-home lounge on a Saturday afternoon, the cab of a removals van.

The giving that grows out of that note is a lovely thing to watch, but it only stays lovely while it is free. A young person does not owe the world good deeds as the price of being loved, and does not owe their family a debt for being raised. Nor do they have to wait until they are grown before they are allowed to help. They can give now, in the place where they already are. Many of them are longing to.

And then there is the letting go. For a parent, a carer, a grandparent or a teacher, it may be the hardest part of the whole long business of loving a child, and it is the part that everything else was for. They may choose a road you would never have chosen. They may go, and come back, and go again. None of that is failure, theirs or yours.

No young person is required to stay, and none is required to go. And the people who love them are allowed to stand on the harbour wall, lift a hand, and then sit down on the bench and wait for the phone to buzz.

100

The Tuning Fork

Marian got the kind of exam results that make teachers stop you in the corridor. By the spring of her first sixth-form year they were stopping her to talk about medicine, and law, and a summer school at a university she had never heard of.

What Marian wanted to do was tune pianos.

It had started when she was fourteen. The old upright in their front room, which had come from her great-aunt and sounded like it, was finally booked in for a tuning, and a man called Mr Hadley arrived with a canvas bag of tools and took the front off it. Marian sat on the stairs and watched for two hours. She watched him strike a note, and another, and listen to the wobble between them, and turn a pin a hair's breadth until the wobble slowed and stopped. When he packed up she asked him eleven questions. He answered all of them and then, looking at her over his glasses, let her try one string herself.

Her mum had been at home with her since she was four, while her dad drove a lorry for the parcel depot out on the bypass. Her mum had heard every one of Marian's ideas over the kitchen table for thirteen years. When Marian told her about the pianos, she did not say *What about medicine*. She said, "What does Mr Hadley say?"

Mr Hadley was sixty-eight and had not taken an apprentice in twenty years. He said he would give her a trial over the summer, Saturdays only, and she was not to expect to be paid.

She went with him in his little estate car up and down the coast: chapels, primary schools, a pub piano with beer in it, a big house where the piano was worth more than the car. He taught her to listen for the beats between two strings. He taught her patience, which he said was most of it. He said she had the best ears he had come across in forty years, and then told her not to let it go to her head, because ears were nothing without wrists.

The places he did not charge properly for were the care homes along the seafront. "Nobody pays to tune those," he said. "So I do them at cost, and I don't do them often enough."

At the end of the summer she asked whether she could do them on her own, on Saturday afternoons, for nothing. He took his glasses off and polished them on his jumper, which she would learn meant yes, and then went out to the car and came back with a spare tuning lever.

The piano at Fernlea was the worst she had ever seen. It stood in the corner of the lounge with a pile of jigsaw boxes on top of it, and it had dropped so far below pitch that it took her three Saturdays to bring it back up, a little at a time, so the strings would not snap. The residents watched her from their armchairs, mostly with the television on.

On the third Saturday she set the last string and played a scale up the whole keyboard to check it.

From the chair nearest the window, a small woman in a lilac cardigan said, quite loudly, "That's better. That's how it ought to sound."

The care worker told Marian afterwards that Mrs Pryce had taught piano in the town for thirty-eight years and had sold her own when she moved in. She did not join in with things. As far as anyone knew, she had never once gone near the lounge piano.

The next Saturday Marian finished early, sat down on the stool, and played the one piece she knew all the way through. It was not very good. Halfway through, Mrs Pryce got up, crossed the lounge with her stick, and stood at Marian's shoulder.

"Your left hand is asleep," she said. "Again. From the top."

Marian goes every Saturday now. She tunes whatever needs tuning, and then she has a lesson, and nobody pays anybody. She is training properly with Mr Hadley, and has a place on a piano technology course for next year. Her old head of year still thinks she is wasting herself, and says so, kindly, whenever he sees her.

Before every lesson, Marian takes the tuning fork Mr Hadley gave her, taps it on her knee and holds it against the lid. The A rings out across the lounge, under the television and the tea trolley, and in the chair by the window Mrs Pryce closes her eyes to listen.

Sit with this: What does the young person you know watch for hours without being asked?

101

Lights Halfway Up

Bryn was six the first time he was carried out of a cinema, and he was carried out of every one after that.

It was always the same. The lights went down, and the dark came in all at once, like water. Then the adverts started, so loud that the sound seemed to be inside his chest instead of in the room. He would clamp his hands over his ears and make a noise to cover it, and people would turn round. His mum would pick him up, all of him, arms and legs and coat, and carry him sideways along the row, saying sorry, sorry, sorry, to a line of knees. In the foyer she would sit with him on the carpet by the pick-and-mix until he could breathe again. She never once told him off. She just never got to see the end of anything either.

He was diagnosed as autistic when he was eight. By then he had stopped asking to go.

At nineteen he worked at the Plaza, the old single-screen picture house on the high street, with its red seats and its ceiling painted with gold stars that nobody looked up at. He sold tickets, swept the aisles between showings and changed the letters on the board outside with a long pole. He knew every seat by its number, and which ones creaked. On Tuesday mornings, before opening, Mr Oldroyd let him run the projector with the house lights up and the sound turned low, and he would sit in row J, alone, and watch a whole film from beginning to end.

In October a woman came to the box office twenty minutes into the Saturday matinee and asked, very quietly, whether she could have her money back. A boy of about seven was pressed against her side with his face in her coat and both hands clamped over his ears. He was humming one long note.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "We didn't get past the adverts. I'm sorry about the noise he made. We did try."

Bryn looked at the boy's hands. He knew exactly how hard they were pressing.

He gave her the refund. He did not find the words for anything else in time. He watched her go out of the door with the boy still folded against her, and he thought of his mum, sitting on the foyer carpet in her good coat, missing the end.

On Monday he knocked on Mr Oldroyd's office door with a sheet of paper.

Once a month, on a Sunday morning. No adverts and no trailers. The lights only halfway down. The sound turned down by a third. People could walk about, sit on the floor, flap their hands, talk, make noise, go out to the foyer and come back in as often as they liked. Nobody would be asked to be quiet. Nobody would tut.

Mr Oldroyd read it twice. "Who'd come?" he said.

"Everybody who's ever left," said Bryn.

Mr Oldroyd looked at him over the paper for a long moment. Then he said they would try one, in November, and if nobody came they would never speak of it again.

Bryn chose the film himself, an old cartoon about a dog who gets lost and finds his way home. He wrote the poster himself too, and stuck it in the box-office window. *You can leave and come back. You can make noise. You will not be the only one.*

On the first Sunday morning he stood at the door of the screen at ten to ten. There were eleven people, then twenty. A girl in a superhero cape. A man of about thirty on his own, who said he had always wanted to see a film at the pictures. And at five to ten, the woman from October, holding the boy by the hand. He was wearing a woolly hat pulled right down over his ears.

"We saw your poster," she said. Her name was Catrin. The boy was Huw.

Huw stood in the doorway for most of a minute, looking at the half-lit room and the gold stars. Bryn did not hurry him. When he

finally went in, he did not sit in a seat. He lay on his back on the carpet at the front, under the screen, and watched it upside down.

Nobody minded. The girl in the cape ran up and down the aisle twice. Twice Huw went out to the foyer with his mum, and twice he came back in.

The dog found his way home. The music swelled, and the names began to roll up the screen.

Bryn, by the door, saw that Huw was still there, on his back on the carpet, hat off now, watching the names go by. Catrin had sat down on the floor beside him. She was holding her coat in her lap and crying without making any fuss about it.

"Is that the end?" Huw said.

"That's the end," said Catrin.

Huw stayed where he was until the very last line had gone. Then he sat up, looked round at the room with the lights still halfway up, and found Bryn standing at the door.

"Next time," he said, "I'm having a seat."

Sit with this: What did a young person you know once need, that nobody quite knew how to give? What might they know about it now?

102

For When the Pull Comes from the Side

The envelope came on a Thursday, and Hamish opened it in the boatyard toilets because it was the only door with a lock.

He had passed the practical half of his boatbuilding qualification in the spring, with the highest mark the college had given in six years. The examiner had run his hand along the planking of Hamish's test piece and said nothing at all, which the tutor said afterwards was the best review there was. The written paper was the other half. Without it there was no qualification, and without that the yard could not keep him on at full rate after Christmas.

He had been given extra time and a reader, as he had ever since a proper assessment, when he was nine, put a name to what the words did. He had revised at the kitchen table every night for three months, with his finger under the words. He had counted on it more than he had counted on anything.

The letter said he had missed it by four marks.

He did not go back to the shed. He texted the foreman that he was ill, which was nearly true, and walked out of the yard, past the harbour and along the shore path beyond the last of the houses, until there was nothing but shingle and the grey water coming in.

He could not go home. His mum would be kind, and his dad would be kind, and his little sister, who was nine and read everything, including the backs of cereal boxes, would ask him what he got. He could not bear any of it. He sat on the shingle with his back against an upturned dinghy and took a length of old cord out of his jacket pocket, and tied things, and untied them, and watched the tide.

It was getting on for four when he heard a stick on the stones.

Mr Merriman was eighty-one and did not, as a rule, come along the shore path any more. He came slowly, choosing where to put his feet, and when he reached the dinghy he lowered himself onto its hull with a noise like a door that wanted oiling.

"Your dad rang the chandlery," he said. "Thought you might have come this way."

Hamish did not answer. Mr Merriman did not seem to need him to. They looked at the sea.

"Four marks," Hamish said at last.

"Ah."

"I knew every answer. I can scarf a plank with my eyes shut. I just couldn't get it down." He stopped. "It's the same as it always was. Nine years, and it's the same."

A gull came down on the tideline, looked at them both, and went off again.

"I was going to be a ship's officer," Mr Merriman said. "Did you know that?"

Hamish shook his head.

"Seventeen. I had a place at the nautical college in the city, if I passed the entrance. Navigation. Deep sea. Valparaíso, Yokohama. I had a map on my bedroom wall with pins in it." He turned his stick in the shingle. "The written paper finished me. I could do the sums in my head and not get them onto the page in the right order. They sent a letter. Very polite."

"What did you do?"

"Went out with my uncle on his boat the week after, because there was nothing else, and sulked for about two years." He very nearly smiled. "Then I stopped sulking and got on with it, and in time I had a boat of my own. One night in 1971 it blew a gale and the engine went, and we were drifting onto the rocks off the point, and I got a line onto the harbour launch with a rolling hitch, in the dark, with my hands frozen. Three of us came home that night. If I'd been in Yokohama, I'd not have been there to throw it."

Hamish had read about that night once, years ago, on the back of a luggage label, with his finger under the words. He had never known the first half of it.

"I'm not saying failing was good," said Mr Merriman. "It wasn't. It was miserable. I'm saying it was a letter. It wasn't me."

He held out his hand, palm up. After a moment Hamish understood, and put the cord into it.

The old man's fingers were stiff now and twisted at the knuckles, and he tied slowly. Round the shaft of his stick, twice, then across and over and tucked, and he pulled it sideways, hard, and it held.

"For when the pull comes from the side," Hamish said, before he could stop himself.

"That's the one."

They walked back along the shore path as the light went, very slowly, Hamish carrying the stick when it was wanted and Mr Merriman pretending it was not. The chandlery was shut, but the board was still in its window, as it had been for nine years: a row of knots on short lengths of rope, the luggage labels under them gone brown. The last label was written in a child's large, leaning capitals. THE HAMISH. FOR HOLDING ON WHEN IT GETS ROUGH.

He stood and read it under the streetlight, easily, the whole thing at once.

Then he went home, where the kitchen light was on and his dad was at the window, and his sister had been told, firmly, not to ask.

Sit with this: When a young person fails at the thing they most counted on, what do they believe it says about them? What would you want them to hear, and from whom?

103

The Guitar in the Window

The guitar had been in the window of Mr Tolland's music shop since Lee was thirteen.

It was not the most expensive thing in there. It was second-hand, sunburst, with a scratch on the back where somebody's belt buckle had rubbed it. Every few months Mr Tolland took it out of the window and put another one in, and every time, within a fortnight, it was back. Lee was fairly sure by now that he did this on purpose. When Lee was sixteen, Mr Tolland let him play it in the back of the shop, once, for ten minutes, and then told him to come back when he had the money.

At nineteen Lee was a year into an apprenticeship as a plasterer, and in March he came off the first-year rate onto a proper wage. The first full payslip arrived on a Friday. He read it in the van, twice. On Saturday morning he walked into the shop, and Mr Tolland took the guitar out of the window without being asked.

It took nearly all of it. He did not mind. He carried it home in its case like something alive, and played it in his room until his mum banged on the wall at half past eleven, and then played it quieter.

It was the Wednesday after that he found out.

He came home early because the job was rained off, and his mum was not expecting him. She was at the kitchen table with a bank statement and a letter from the electric with red on it, and she was on the phone, in the voice she kept for doctors and the council, asking

whether there was any chance at all of spreading it over another three months. The heating, he realised, had not been on all week. He had thought she was just being careful.

She saw him in the doorway, said "Thank you, I'll hold," and put her hand over the phone.

"Don't," she said.

He had not said anything yet.

"Don't look like that."

He went upstairs. The guitar was on its stand by the bed, in the light from the window, and he could not look at it. He put it back in its case and did up all five catches.

When she came up he was sitting on the bed with the case across his knees.

"I'll take it back," he said. "Mr Tolland'll give me most of it. You should have said."

"You're not taking it back."

"Mum—"

"Lee." She sat down on the end of the bed, which tipped the case, and they both grabbed for it. "Listen to me. My electric is not your fault. I've been on my own with the bills since you were five. I've been behind before and I've always got level, and I'll get level this time. It's three months of being careful. I'm not having you sell your guitar so I can feel worse than I already do."

"I didn't even think."

"You're nineteen. You weren't meant to be thinking about my electric. That was my job." She looked at the case. "I should have told you, though. Not so you'd fix it. So you'd know. That's my mistake, not yours."

They went down to the kitchen. She put the kettle on and the bank statement in the middle of the table, and for the first time in his life she showed him all of it: what came in, what went out, the rent, the council tax, how much the electric had gone up since last winter. It took an hour. He had not known any of it. At the start he felt about twelve. By the end he did not.

"So I'll pay board," he said. "Proper board. Not twenty quid when I think of it."

"You'll pay board," she said, "because you live here and you're working, and that's fair, and it's what grown-ups do. We'll agree a number. It won't be all your wages, and it won't go up because you've had a bad week of feeling guilty."

"What if I want to give you more?"

She thought about that properly, with both hands round her mug.

"Then wait," she said, "until you want to and you're not sorry about anything. That's a present. The other thing's a fine. I don't want fines off you, love."

They agreed a number. She wrote it on the back of the envelope with red on it and propped it against the clock on the mantelpiece.

On the Friday he came home with fish and chips for two, for no reason at all, and they ate them out of the paper at the kitchen table with their coats on, because the heating was still being careful.

Afterwards she wiped her fingers and nodded at the stairs. "Right," she said. "Let's hear what I didn't pay for."

He fetched the guitar and played her the first song he had ever learned, slowly, and she sang the chorus, wrong, with her mouth full.

Sit with this: When a young person gives to their family, is it coming from love or from guilt?

104

The Petition That Reached Every School

A true story

In 2017, Amika George was seventeen and still at school in England. She had no campaign behind her and no title in front of her name. She was a pupil, like millions of others.

Then she read a news report. It said that some girls were missing school because their families could not afford sanitary products.

It is the kind of sentence that is easy to read quickly. Read it slowly, and it is hard to forget. Girls in one of the richest countries in the world, kept out of their lessons, not by illness or by choice, but because there was not enough money at home for something every girl needs.

We do not know exactly where she was when she read it, or what she said to anyone afterwards. What we know is what she did next. Shocked by what she had read, she started an online petition. It asked the government to provide free period products to children from low-income families, so that no girl would have to miss school for that reason.

That first step was an ordinary one. Many of us have read something in the news that made us angry, and closed the page, and carried on with our day. A petition is not a grand thing to start. It is a few lines of writing and a button to press. Anyone can do it. Most of them are signed by a few dozen people and then forgotten.

This one was not forgotten. In the end, 277,206 people signed it.

From there, Amika founded a campaign, which she called #FreePeriods. She helped to organise a protest outside Downing Street, and around two thousand people came to stand there with her. The government itself would later describe her campaign as a grassroots, student-led movement. It had begun with a schoolgirl, and it was carried by young people.

The campaign kept going. In January 2019, it launched a crowdfunded legal challenge, with money given by members of the public who wanted to see the matter taken further.

And in January 2020, the government launched a scheme making free period products available to all state-funded schools and colleges in England. When it announced the scheme, it named Amika George and #FreePeriods.

That is the story, as far as the record goes. It is a short one to tell, and it took about three years to happen.

But a few things about it stay with you.

Nobody asked her to do it. She was not doing it for a school project or to make an application look better. She was not told that

she ought to give something back. She read something that seemed to her plainly wrong, and she chose to act on it, then, at seventeen, without waiting until she was older or had a job or a title or any kind of authority. She simply began where she was.

And what she began did not stay with her. It did not end with her name in the newspapers. It reached every state-funded school and college in England. Most of the pupils who have been helped by it since will never know her name. They will just know that when they needed something, it was there, and that they did not have to stay at home.

Perhaps somewhere there is a girl who would have missed three days of school a month, every month, for years, and didn't. Perhaps there are thousands. Nobody can count that kind of thing.

It is a good thing to keep in mind, when we wonder whether the young are ready to do anything that matters. Sometimes they are not waiting for permission. Sometimes they are only waiting for us to notice that they have already started.

> *Sit with this:* What does the young person you know care about so much that it makes them angry? What might taking that anger seriously look like in your house?

105

Blue Biro

Lisa had been drawing on Danny since Year 8.

It started in double science. She sat behind him, he had the kind of neck that was asking for it, and by the end of the lesson there was a small blue star just above his collar. He did not find out until PE. He did not wash it off until Thursday, either, which she only discovered later, and which she sometimes thought was how the whole thing had begun.

They were twenty now. They had been together, give or take a fortnight in Year 11 that neither of them mentioned, for six years.

Their mums went to the same Zumba class. Danny's nan had called her "our Lisa" since she was fourteen.

In October Lisa was offered a trainee place on a marine research ship she had been applying to for two years: eight months at a time, the North Atlantic first, then the Southern Ocean, then wherever the funding went. It was what she had wanted since she was eleven, when she saw a programme about whales and refused to go to bed.

Danny was glad for her. He said so, and meant it, and took her out for a curry. And then for three weeks neither of them said the other thing.

The other thing was that Danny had just signed up to qualify as an electrician with the firm his uncle worked for, and had put his name down for a flat on the estate behind the park. Once, half asleep in the car, he had said he wanted about four kids and a dog with a stupid name. He loved this town. He loved the chippy and the five-a-side and knowing everybody's dad. He was not going to stop loving it.

Neither of them had done anything wrong. That was what made it so hard to say.

They said it in the end in his car, in the car park above the beach, on a Sunday afternoon with the rain coming sideways off the sea and the windscreen steaming up.

"I keep thinking," Lisa said, "that if we stop, it won't have counted. Like six years were just practice." She was looking at the dashboard. "And I can't bear that. So I keep not saying anything."

Danny was quiet. He drew a line in the steam on his window with one finger, and rubbed it out.

"Same," he said. "I thought if I said it, it'd be like saying I never meant any of it."

"Did you?"

"Lisa."

"I know. I know you did." She wiped her face with her sleeve, crossly. "That's the problem."

They sat with it. The rain eased a little, and a man in a cagoule walked a very small dog the length of the car park and back.

"Your grandad's funeral," Danny said eventually. "You came in your school shoes because you'd grown out of your good ones, and you stood next to me the whole time and didn't say anything stupid. Nobody else managed that."

Lisa laughed, and it came out wet. "You drove to Bristol at two in the morning when I'd missed the last train and was crying in the bus station."

"You told me I was allowed to be rubbish at things."

"You taught me to change a fuse."

"You still can't."

"I can. I just don't want to."

They went on like that for a while, in no particular order, handing things across. Not to win anything. More the way you pass a box of old photographs back and forth and say, *Look at this one*. Somewhere in the middle of it Lisa noticed that none of it had stopped being true because they were talking about the end. It was all still there in the steamed-up car with them, every bit as true as it had been.

"It was real," Danny said, as if he had just checked.

"It still is."

"It just doesn't go where you're going."

"No." She looked at him properly for the first time all afternoon. "And I'm not going to drag you somewhere you'd hate, and you're not going to keep me here. That's the bit I'm proud of, actually. Us not doing that."

Afterwards they bought chips and ate them in the car, which was a mistake with the windows like that, and talked about nothing in particular.

She left in January. Danny drove her to the port with her kitbag in the boot, because there was nobody else she would have let do it, and carried it as far as the gate where only crew could go.

At the gate she took a biro out of her coat pocket, took hold of his hand, and drew a small star on the back of it, carefully, the way she had at thirteen.

Then she went through, and did not look back, because they had agreed she wouldn't.

He kept it till Thursday.

Sit with this: What might it mean to let something be true and finished at once?

106

The Passenger Rules

Kieran's mums took it in turns to teach him to drive, and within a fortnight it was clear to everybody, including the cat, that one of them should stop.

Helen was a natural. She sat in the passenger seat of the old blue Fiesta with her hands folded in her lap and talked to him in the voice she used for ringing the bank. "Lovely. Bit of gas. Mirror. Lovely." When he stalled at the lights on the ring road, three times, she said, "Happens to everyone," and told him about the time she had stalled in front of a hearse.

Claire was another matter.

Claire was the calmer of the two in every other part of life. She had been a lifeboat volunteer for eleven years. She had once removed a wasp's nest from the loft with a tea towel. But put her in the passenger seat beside her own son and something happened to her. She held the handle above the door with both hands. Her right foot pressed down hard on a brake pedal that was not there. She did not shout, because she had promised not to. She made small noises instead, little gasps and sharp intakes of breath, and once, when he took a roundabout a bit quickly, a sound like a kettle coming to the boil.

"Mum."

"I'm fine."

"You're doing the foot."

"I'm not doing the foot." She looked down. She was doing the foot.

On the third Sunday Kieran pulled into the empty lorry park on the industrial estate where they practised, turned the engine off, tore

a sheet off the pad of sticky notes in the glovebox, and wrote out, in capitals, THE PASSENGER RULES.

1. No gasping.

2. No foot.

3. One "ooh" per lesson. Use it wisely.

4. Hands in lap or holding a sausage roll.

He stuck it to the dashboard in front of her. Claire read it. Then she laughed so much she had to get out of the car and walk round it twice.

They kept the rules. Or rather, Claire kept them, with visible effort, every Sunday morning through the spring, among the closed warehouses and the parked trailers and a fox that lived behind the carpet depot and watched them reverse round its cones. Helen bought the sausage rolls from the garage on the way. Claire held hers in both hands like something that might go off, and ate it very slowly, and stared straight ahead. On one heroic morning she got through an entire lesson without using her "ooh", and Kieran wrote *SAVED* on the sticky note and drew a medal.

The foot took longest. Helen said the foot might be with her for life.

He passed his test in June, at the second attempt, on a hot Tuesday with the windows down. He rang from the test centre car park, and Claire, who was at work, had to go and stand in the stationery cupboard.

The following Saturday he was going on his own for the first time, the forty minutes along the coast to see his friend Tom, who had a job for the summer at the caravan park. The insurance had been sorted, at enormous expense. The car had been washed, by him, without being asked, which Helen said was the most frightening thing that had happened all year.

They stood on the front step in their dressing gowns to see him off. Kieran checked his mirrors with great ceremony, which he knew they were both watching. He did his seatbelt. Then he leaned across, opened the glovebox, took out the sticky note with THE PASSENGER RULES on it, now soft at the corners and slightly

greasy, and stuck it on the inside of the windscreen, on the passenger side, facing the empty seat.

He wound the window down. "In case anybody needs reminding," he said.

He pulled away from the kerb, smoothly, indicated, and was gone round the corner by the postbox.

Helen waved until there was nothing left to wave at. Then she turned to say something, and stopped, and looked down.

Claire was standing quite still on the front step, in her slippers, with both hands folded neatly in front of her, perfectly calm. And her right foot was pressed flat to the doormat, hard, as if the step itself were travelling much too fast towards a roundabout.

"Ooh," said Claire, very quietly, to nobody.

Helen took her hand. They went in and put the radio on, and at twenty past eleven Claire's phone buzzed on the kitchen table. It was a photograph of the sea, and a sausage roll balanced on a sunny dashboard, and two words.

Arrived. Foot?

Sit with this: What is the young person you love ready to do on their own that you are not yet quite ready to watch?

107

The Board on the Fridge

Muriel had a whiteboard stuck to the fridge door with four magnets, and on it, in different coloured pens, she wrote where everybody was.

Muriel: early shift, back 3. (She drove the number 7 bus.) *Timothy: school then football.* And underneath, for whichever younger child was living with her at the time, *school, Nan's for tea Weds*, or *contact Saturday 10 till 12.*

Timothy had arrived at twelve, after two placements that had ended in a hurry. On his first morning he had stood in front of the fridge reading his own name on the board, as if it were a trick. Muriel

had pretended not to notice him doing it. He had been there six years.

The letter came a few weeks after his eighteenth birthday. It was polite and it used a lot of phrases like *transition planning* and *independence pathway*. It said that a room had been identified in supported lodgings across town, and that he would be expected to move in after his exams.

Timothy read it at the kitchen table and put it down and went upstairs. Muriel read it after him. Then she rang the social worker and asked for a meeting, and said, in the voice she used on passengers who would not pay, that she would like Timothy to be there.

The meeting was in a room at the council offices with a box of tissues on the table that nobody touched. The social worker was young and kind and overworked, and talked for some time about the options. Muriel said that Timothy was welcome to stay with her for as long as he liked, and that there was a scheme for exactly this, called Staying Put, and she had looked it up: if they both wanted it, and it was right for him, the council had to support him to stay with her until he was twenty-one. The social worker said yes, that was right, and that the paperwork and the money could take a while to sort out. Everyone looked at Timothy.

He had not said anything for twenty minutes. He had been looking at the box of tissues.

"I'll go when I'm ready," he said. "I'm not ready."

There was a silence.

"I want to do my exams," he said. "And I want to have the summer. And then I want to choose where I go. Not get a letter about it."

The social worker wrote that down, word for word. Then she said she would put it in his plan. It took two months and a great many forms, and Muriel went to more meetings than she had been to in the previous six years put together, but in the end he stayed.

He did his exams. He had his summer, most of which he spent at the football club and on Muriel's settee. He applied for an

apprenticeship with a building firm in a city sixty miles away, and got it, and found a room in a shared house with three other apprentices. He did all of it himself. Muriel drove him to look at the room and waited in the car.

On the morning he left, the car was packed by eight. He came into the kitchen for his keys and stopped in front of the fridge, the way he had on his first morning.

Muriel had not wiped his line. It said, in blue pen, *Timothy: Leeds. Sunday dinner when home.*

He stood and read it for a while. Muriel was doing something unnecessary with the kettle.

"You don't need to ring first," she said, to the kettle.

He comes back about one Sunday in three. His old room has a younger lad's things in it now, so he sleeps on the settee, which he says he prefers. He brings his washing. Muriel complains about it, loudly, and does it.

In the spring a new boy came to live with Muriel, a thin, watchful nine-year-old who had come with a carrier bag and very little to say. On his first morning he stood in front of the fridge and read the board, slowly, moving his lips. His own name was there, in green. Above it was Muriel's, and below it was a line in blue that he did not understand.

"Who's Timothy?" he said.

Muriel put a bowl of cereal on the table.

"He lives here," she said. "He's just not in."

Sit with this: For a young person leaving your care, who is choosing when to go? What could you leave on the board for them, in their own colour?

108

And Son

The van had said *Howard Pike & Son, Removals* on the side for twenty years. Louis was twenty. The sign had gone on in the month he was born.

Howard had worked for his own father in the same yard, with the same ampersand on an older van, from the age of sixteen. He had never really been asked whether he wanted to. Nor, in the end, had Louis. Since Louis's mum had left, when he was nine, it had been the two of them in the house behind the yard and the two of them in the cab, Saturdays and school holidays and then every day once Louis had finished college. Louis could reverse a seven-and-a-half tonner into a terraced street better than his father. He could carry a wardrobe down three flights with a grip of the corner and a word to the man at the other end. He was good at it. Everybody said so.

What nobody knew was that Louis wanted to be a midwife.

He had known since he was seventeen, when his cousin had gone into labour in their front room at Christmas, too fast for the hospital, and a community midwife had arrived in the snow with a bag and a torch and taken over the whole house in about four minutes. Louis had made the tea and fetched the towels and stood in the hall with his heart thumping. He had never seen anyone so calm, or so useful, or so completely in the right place.

He told his father in the cab, on the way back from a job, because that was where they talked about things, side by side, looking at the road.

Howard said nothing for eleven miles. Then he said, "Midwife," as if it were a word in another language, and turned the radio on.

It did not come up again for a month. He was not unkind. He was just quiet, the van was quiet, the evenings were quiet, and the sign stayed on the side of the van, and Louis looked at it every morning and felt like a thief.

The interview was in March, a hundred and fifty miles away. The trains were on strike that week. Louis had worked out a route with

three coaches and a long wait in a bus station, and he was going to have to leave at four in the morning.

At half past three, the van was in the yard with its engine running and the cab light on.

Howard did not explain. He handed Louis a flask and pulled out. For the first hour there was only the radio, turned low. Then, somewhere on the motorway in the dark, Howard said, "Go on, then. Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Why you want it. Properly. Not what you said in the cab. All of it."

So Louis told him. The snow, and the torch, and the midwife in the front room. The books he had been reading under the counter in the yard office. The volunteering he had done at the hospital on his days off, which he had told his father was the gym. Howard listened the whole way, and asked questions, good ones, the kind he asked customers about what was fragile and what could go on its side.

At the university, Howard parked in the visitors' car park, and waited in the cab for four hours with the paper and the flask. When Louis came out, Howard did not ask how it had gone. He looked at his son's face and started the engine.

Louis got the place.

In September, Howard moved him. He did it the way he did every job: blankets round the desk, the mattress strapped upright, the boxes labelled on two sides, the lamp wrapped in a towel. He would not let Louis carry anything heavy, which was ridiculous, because Louis was the stronger of the two. They pulled up outside the halls of residence in the van with *& Son* on the side, among all the family cars.

A lad from the room opposite helped carry the last box in, and looked out of the window at the van.

"Is that your firm?" he said.

Louis hesitated.

"It's ours," said Howard, from the doorway, before Louis could answer. He looked at his son for a moment. "He's on secondment."

He drove home that evening with the van empty, the blankets folded on the passenger seat. Several people in the yard asked him, over the next few weeks, whether he would be changing the sign now.

He never did. The ampersand is still there on the side of the van, a little faded, going up and down the motorway, and most weeks it goes past the hospital where Louis is training.

Sit with this: Is there a road you have kept ready for a young person, without quite asking them? What might it cost you to help them down a different one, and what might it give?

Things you might try

Listen for the note, not the result. Over the next week, notice what the young person in your life does when nobody is asking them to: what they lose track of time doing, who they are drawn to help, what makes them angry on someone else's behalf. Just notice. And if a result goes against them, an exam, a plan, a hope, sit with them before you say anything about what comes next. Let them hear, in your own words, that the letter is not them.

Let giving be free. Look for one thing near home that a young person could genuinely take part in: a piano nobody has tuned in years, a lunch club, a neighbour who would be glad of company. Offer it as an invitation, never a requirement, and never as a way of earning anything. At home, if money is tight, tell them plainly, not so they will fix it but so they know. Agree together what is fair for them to give, and keep it separate from guilt. A present and a fine can look the same on the table; they feel very different.

Ask them to run it, not just join it. If a young person has spotted a problem, a door that quietly shuts some people out, a kind of help that has forgotten what it is like to need it, take them seriously. Ask what they would change, and help them put it to

whoever is in charge. Notice the difference between being allowed to help and being trusted to lead.

Leave their name on the board. If a young person is leaving home, or leaving your care, find one small, solid way of saying that the door stays open. A line on the fridge that nobody wipes, a standing Sunday dinner, a settee that is still theirs, a message that says "You don't need to ring first." And if they are choosing a path you would not have chosen, try saying the words out loud, plainly: "Go on, then. Tell me." Then go with them as far as the quay, and lift your hand.

❧

Your story

Think of a leaving in your own life. Perhaps you were the one with the rucksack, going up the gangway without looking back. Perhaps you were the one on the harbour wall with your hand still raised. Perhaps someone left your name on a board, or a light on, or a door unlocked.

What did they give you as you went, and what did you take without knowing? Sit with it a moment before you turn the page. It is part of the long thread of your family.

EPILOGUE

Twelve Tea Towels

When Jessie was grown, she opened a bakery on the high street in a shop that had once sold wool.

On Friday afternoons in term time, the infants from the school across the road came over in a crocodile, holding hands, and filed into the back room in aprons that reached their ankles. There were twelve of them. Each had a small bowl with a name on a strip of masking tape, and each had a tea towel. Jessie worked from the big brown bowl with the chip on the rim. It had come to her when Gwen died, along with the biscuit tin.

The children kneaded. Mostly they pressed their fists into the dough and watched them come out sticky. Then they covered their bowls and carried them, very slowly, to the long shelf above the ovens, where it was warm.

"Now what?"

"Now we wait."

They were six, and waiting was not something they were good at. So Jessie let them look. Every quarter of an hour she went along the shelf and lifted one corner of each tea towel, a crack and no more, and each child stood on tiptoe and put an eye to it.

"Looking," she said. "Not touching."

By three o'clock eleven bowls had risen, some in great soft domes, some lopsided, one with a crack across the top like a smile. The twelfth had not moved at all.

It belonged to Bertie. He had made his dough with great care, and now it sat in the bottom of the bowl like a pebble in a bath. When the others shaped their loaves and put them in tins, he stood by the shelf with his hands behind his back, because he had been told not to touch, and he was going to get that part right.

"Is it broken?" he asked.

"No," said Jessie. "It's still thinking."

The bell went at half past three. Bertie went home with no loaf. Jessie left his bowl on the shelf when she locked up, and at seven she came down from the flat upstairs in her slippers to look. The dough had climbed right to the rim and was nudging the tea towel up from underneath. She shaped it and baked it there and then.

On Monday Bertie's mother brought him in before school. The loaf was waiting in brown paper with his name on, and he carried it out of the shop with both arms, the way you carry a sleeping cat.

There was a girl, too, a quiet one with plasters on both thumbs, who did not want a loaf. She asked if she could press hers flat instead and push her fingers into it all over, and Jessie said yes. It came out of the oven golden and full of hollows, and nothing like anything on the shelves. Jessie stood it on the counter by the till, where a customer asked to buy it and was told it was not for sale.

In September a new class came, with twelve new names on the shelf. When they had gone back to school, Jessie went along the row, lifting each corner a crack and laying it down again.

"Go on, then," she said under her breath. "Show us who you are."

At the end of the row she found Bertie, who had come in after school with his mother and slipped through to the back room while she queued for bread. He was up on the step-stool with one corner of somebody else's tea towel lifted, looking. He laid it down as carefully as a blanket.

"Take your time," he told it.

A Blessing

May the child who comes among us
Find the door already wide,
And a room of waiting faces
Glad to have them there inside.
May we turn them round to face us,
Not to mould them, but to see;
May they hear us from the first day:
"Show us who you are. Be free."
May the small one who is frightened
Find a lap before a rule;
May they know that they are wanted
Long before they go to school.
May their days have shape and rhythm,
Bread and bath and story read;
May the questions that they carry
Find a grown-up who will heed.
When they stumble, may the mending
Come before a word of blame;
May they learn that they can falter
And be loved there all the same.
May they find their own true music,
Hands to make and feet to run;
May they have a voice that's counted
In the things that must be done.
May the young who start to teach us
Find us humble, find us near;
May a circle stand around them
Every season, every year.
And the day they need to leave us,

May we open up the hand,
Bake the bread, and wave them onward
To the place where they will stand.
"Here you are," we'll say, and mean it,
"We have waited. Now we see.
Go and show the world who you are,
All that you will choose to be."

Share Your Story

Somewhere in your life there is a moment that belongs in a book like this one.

It might be from your own childhood: the grown-up who noticed, the door that opened, the afternoon that changed something. It might be from your life as a parent, a grandparent, a foster carer, a teacher, a coach, a nurse, a neighbour. It might be something a child said to you that you have never forgotten. It might be a moment when you got it wrong, and what happened next.

If a story in these pages reminded you of one of your own, The Narayana Joy Publishing Team, would be honoured to hear it. True stories from readers may one day become a companion to this book.

How to share it. Write it down as simply as you can: what happened, who was there, and what it meant to you. A few hundred words is plenty. Send it through the contact page at narayanajoypublishing.com, with the words "Share Your Story" at the top.

What happens to it. Every story is read by a small editorial group and no one else. It is kept privately, used only for this purpose, and never passed on. Nothing will be published without your written agreement, and names, places and details will be changed so that no one can be identified, including you and any child. You can ask for your story to be withdrawn and deleted at any time, through the same contact page.

Please do not include the full name, school or address of any child, or anything that could identify a child, without the consent of those who care for them.

If your story is a painful one. Some of the most important stories are. If writing yours stirs things up, please be gentle with yourself, and talk to someone you trust. You do not have to send it to anyone for it to matter.

What Would You Like to See?

This book is part of a larger conversation about how we might educate and care for children in the years ahead: not by writing one more curriculum, but by asking what children, and the people around them, truly need in order to become who they already are.

That conversation is not complete without you. If you have a few minutes, The NJP Team would love your answers to some of these questions. Answer as many or as few as you like.

For the children. What do you wish every child could have, at home and at school, that many do not have now? What would you remove from a child's day, if you could?

For parents and guardians. What would have helped you most, before your child arrived, or in the first years? What support do you wish existed for families like yours?

For teachers and everyone who works with children. What would allow you to see and serve each child as the one they are? What gets in the way?

For the people who make the decisions. If you could say one thing to those who shape schools, services and laws for children, what would it be?

For you. Which story in this book stayed with you, and why?

You can send your answers through the reflection page at narayanajoypublishing.com or forward an email to mailto:egaadministration@protonmail.com.

Answers are read by the same small group, kept privately and never passed on. What we learn will be shared only in general terms, with no one identified.

Where These Stories Come From

The parables in this book are either true or improvised to offer a deeper opportunity for reflective purposes. Any resemblance to real people is unintended, though we hope you will might recognise yourself, your family, or friends in them.

The eleven true stories are told from published accounts, and the main sources are listed below so that you can read more. Where an account leaves something unknown, the story says so rather than inventing it.

Chapter 2 · The Baby Who Visited the Classroom. Roots of Empathy, founded by Mary Gordon in Toronto in 1996 (rootsofempathy.org). The Manitoba trial: Santos and colleagues, "Effectiveness of school-based violence prevention for children and youth", *Healthcare Quarterly*, 2011.

Chapter 3 · When Mothers Became the Warmth. The kangaroo mother care programme at the Instituto Materno Infantil, Bogotá, from 1978; and World Health Organization, "WHO advises immediate skin-to-skin care for survival of small and preterm babies", 15 November 2022 (who.int).

Chapter 4 · The Nursery on Lóczy Street. Emmi Pikler's infant home in Budapest, founded 1946; the Pikler-Lóczy Association and Pikler UK (pikler.co.uk). The key person requirement: Department for Education, *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage*.

Chapter 5 · The Children's House in San Lorenzo. Maria Montessori's first Casa dei Bambini, Rome, 6 January 1907; Montessori Australia, "The first Casa dei Bambini"; the quotation is from Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood* (as cited in the Association Montessori Internationale archive).

Chapter 6 · The Walking Kindergarten. Ella Flatau and the first forest kindergarten in Denmark in the early 1950s; the Forest School Association, "Full principles and criteria for good practice".

Chapter 7 · The Dewdrop on the Paddy. Satyajit Ray's visit to Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan; Ray's own recollections, as reported in *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), "Satyajit's Rabindranath connection".

Chapter 8 · The Doctor Who Brought Himself Before the Court. Janusz Korczak and the Dom Sierot orphanage, Warsaw, from 1912; Yad Vashem educational materials on Korczak; the Treblinka Museum.

Chapter 9 · The School That Learned to Sit in a Circle. Collingwood Primary School, Hull; Estelle Macdonald, "My restorative journey and the story of Hull, UK", International Institute for Restorative Practices (iirp.edu).

Chapter 10 · The Teenagers Who Taught the Internet. Cyber-Seniors, founded in Toronto in 2009 by Kascha and Macaulee Cassaday (cyberseniors.org); the documentary *Cyber-Seniors* (2014).

Chapter 11 · The Review That Listened. Scotland's Independent Care Review and *The Promise* (thepromise.scot); Scottish Government, *Keeping the Promise: implementation plan*.

Chapter 12 · The Petition That Reached Every School. Amika George and #FreePeriods; Department for Education, "Free period products for all schools and colleges", January 2020 (gov.uk); the #FreePeriods petition on change.org. Staying Put in England: Children and Families Act 2014, section 98.

The Gibran lines that open Part One are from "On Children" in *The Prophet* (1923), now in the public domain.