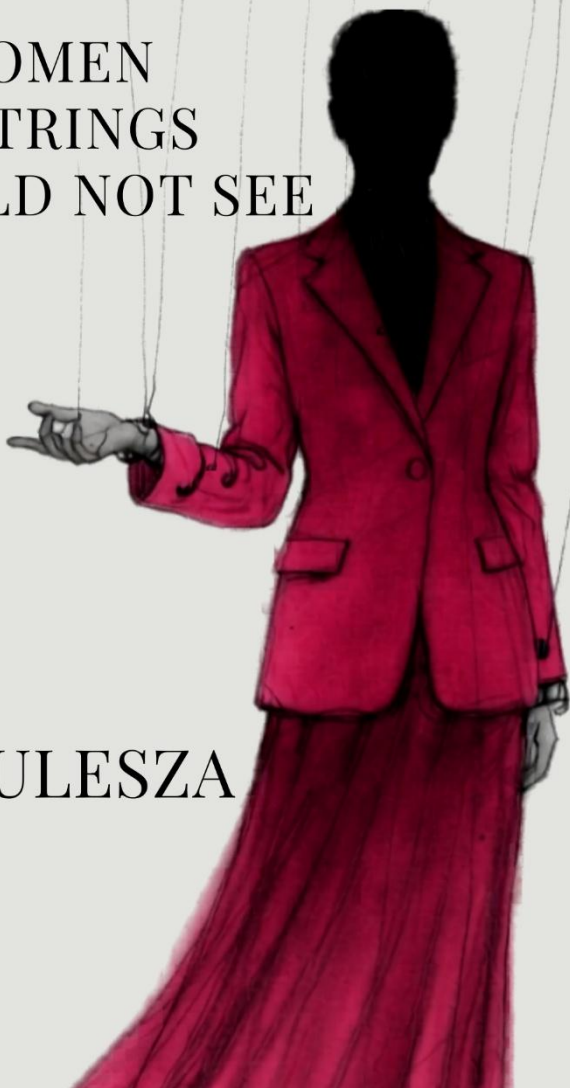


THE SHADOW FACTORY

TWELVE WOMEN
AND THE STRINGS
THEY COULD NOT SEE

SYLWIA KULESZA



THE SHADOW FACTORY

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Make It Clear

**THE
SHADOW FACTORY**

Twelve Women and the Strings
They Could Not See

SYLWIA KULESZA

THE SHADOW FACTORY

Twelve Women and the Strings They Could Not See

By Sylwia Kulesza

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*For all the women who, on a Monday morning,
boarded a tram, the underground, or a taxi, and for a
moment couldn't remember where they were going.
And for those who do remember — but are afraid to
get off.*

A Note from the Author

These are the stories of women from different cultures and distant corners of the world who met – through work, through chance, through the fragile thread of trust woven in hotel corridors, over late-night coffee, and in messages sent at midnight.

Each of them had once thought the same thing: *I thought it was only me*. Not one of them was.

Somewhere, right now, in another office, another time zone, another language, another woman is sitting at her desk at eleven at night, re-reading the same email for the fourth time, wondering if she is imagining things.

*

I did not set out to write this book. I set out, for two decades, simply to work – to be good at my job, to be useful, to be trusted with more. I did it living in Poland, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Middle East, and passing through countless other countries along the way on business trips. Different currencies, different skylines, different rules about what a woman was allowed to wear, say, or want. But underneath all of that difference, I kept finding the same architecture. The same corridors. The same silence, dressed in a different accent.

I began, without quite meaning to, keeping notes. Not for a book – I told myself that for years.

I kept them because I needed somewhere to put the things I could not yet say out loud, and because I had started to notice a pattern I could not unsee. It followed me from bank to bank, from country to country, from one glass tower to the next. It wore excellent tailoring. It called itself mentorship, or ambition, or *the way things are done here*.

*

Over the years, women found me the way water finds the lowest point. Something in how I listened told them it was safe to speak. In a hotel bar in Singapore. In the back row of a training session in Warsaw. In a WhatsApp message that began, *I don't know why I'm telling you this*, sent from somewhere near midnight, somewhere with a different sunrise than mine.

They told me about the meetings that were rescheduled to nine at night, always framed as urgent, always somehow only involving the two of them. About the promotions that were promised in private and never confirmed in writing. About the particular, practiced kindness of certain men – how it could turn, in a sentence, into something that made the air in the room feel different, and how impossible it was to explain that shift to anyone who had not been in the room. About the quiet calculation every one of them had learned to run in her head:

If I say something, what do I lose? My visa. My bonus. My reference. My reputation. My place at the table I fought so hard to reach.

Almost every one of them, at some point in the conversation, used some version of the same sentence. *I thought it was only me.* I began to understand that this sentence was not a confession but the mechanism working exactly as designed.

*

For more than twenty years I watched intelligent, ambitious women arrive full of dreams, only to slowly and gradually allow invisible strings to be attached to them. I saw how the puppets began their quiet shadow dance – a small concession here, a favour that felt like flattery, a silence kept because speaking seemed disproportionate to the offence.

I saw how each individual thread, examined on its own, could always be explained away: *he didn't mean it like that; it was one comment; I probably overreacted; it's just how business gets done here.*

And I saw how those threads, taken together over months and years, became something no one had consented to and almost no one could name.

*

This book is about that process. About strings so thin they remain invisible. About the shadow factory that runs day and night without ever raising its voice.

It runs on schedules, performance reviews, seating charts and the particular vocabulary of *culture fit*, *team player* and *not being difficult*.

*

If you recognise yourself in what follows – in a hallway, a message, a meeting rescheduled to nine at night, a feeling you talked yourself out of having – I want you to know something before you turn the page. You are not reading this by accident, and you are not the only one. You never were.

*"The most dangerous cage
is the one whose bars you cannot see."*

Prologue: A Night in Warsaw

It's 11:47 p.m. when Maya opens the door of the flat she's been renting in Mokotów for six months. The laptop bag cuts into her shoulder through her jacket – she had not noticed it for the past four hours. Only now, standing on the cold tiles after kicking off her shoes, does she feel the ache.

She turns on the kitchen light. On the counter stands the tea she made that morning. Cold. Forgotten. Beside it sits a plate with an untouched sandwich.

Maya Krishnan is thirty-six. Deputy Director of Operational Risk at one of the largest banks in Central Europe. She speaks four languages fluently. She can read currency risk in volatile markets and exit a difficult negotiation without anyone losing face. She knows flight schedules from Warsaw to Singapore and from Singapore to Hanoi by heart. She understands the difference between silence in a Singaporean boardroom and silence in a Warsaw one. She knows the taste of phở at six in the morning by Hoàn Kiếm Lake, and the taste of tea gone cold because there was never time to drink it.

Tonight, standing by the sink with a mug of cold tea, she thinks: *I can't remember the last time I was happy.*

*

A few streets away, Agnieszka Wróbel sits on the edge of the bathtub and looks at her hands.

There is a thin, pale scar on her wrist – the mark left by a year she walked out of. It has faded now, softened into something almost unremarkable, a fine white line that a stranger would have to look twice to notice. But she notices. She always notices.

*

In Singapore, Siti Rahimah stands on the pavement in front of her condominium and cannot make her legs move. She is tired in a way that has nothing to do with working hours. Tired of managing spaces that ought to be safe but aren't. Tired of carrying an invisible map: where you can go, where you can't, who you can sit next to.

*

In Hanoi, Linh Nguyen is finishing a report that her boss will sign with his own name. As always. She closes her laptop and looks out of the window at the street below, where scooters flicker like fireflies in the dark. Something about the way the headlights pulse and vanish pulls her back. She thinks about the little doll she had as a child – the one with jointed arms. Her grandmother used to make them at the market near Đồng Xuân. You pulled a string and the doll raised its arms in surrender.

Linh looks at her own hands resting on the keyboard. She wonders who is holding her strings.

*

This is a story of twelve women who began their careers full of vision and dreams. Most of them in three cities – Warsaw, Singapore, Hanoi. And one, Amara, in whichever city the work had carried her to that month.

Some wanted to change banking from within. Others simply wanted to prove that they could do it – that ambition and authenticity could coexist. Some hoped of promotion; others simply dreamed that their voice would finally be heard in the meeting room. Each carried her own aspiration. Each one of them had a first day, when everything still seemed possible.

This is also the story of what the shadow factory – its systems, its hierarchies, its unwritten rules – did to those dreams. That invisible machine that slowly reshapes you in its own image before you even notice.

It is a story about puppets who forgot they had their own legs. And about how the strings get cut.

*"Forget what the world is waiting for. Ask instead
what brings you to life – and then live it boldly. The
world is starving for people who have awakened"*

Chapter 1

Maya – A Singaporean on the Move

Maya's mother used to say: "Be twice as good as they are. Three times as hardworking. Then maybe they'll notice you."

They were sitting at the kitchen table in their flat on Holland Road in Singapore. Her mother was eating roti prata and reading the newspaper. Maya was doing her maths homework. Her mother said it without looking up, as if she were merely commenting on the weather.

Maya was eight years old at that time. She never forgot it.

*

The Singapore Maya grew up in was a city built on the principle of meritocracy – a word that sounded like a promise – do good work, deliver results, and the rest will follow. It was a philosophy that shaped entire generations. It was bred into her, with English at school, with Mandarin at her grandparents' house, with Tamil at Aunty Meenakshi's during Diwali, when the house smelt of ghee and cardamom and everyone spoke a different language, yet somehow everyone understood one another.

Singapore had inscribed multilingualism into her long before she noticed: the ability to think in English, dream in Tamil, argue in Mandarin, and laugh in Malay. Each language carried its own reality.

She had learned that behind the word “respect” something different stood in each of those languages – and that all her life she had been a translator between worlds, not always successfully.

She would learn much later that in the corporate world there is only one language: the language of the dominant.

*

The flight from London to Singapore takes thirteen hours. Maya had flown this route more times than she could count. She knew there was always turbulence over India on the descent toward Kolkata. She knew that Singaporean customs was the most efficient in the world and that the tea at Changi Airport tasted better than in half the cafés in London.

She had flown to the Singapore branch of the bank for the first time in June, eleven years earlier, carrying a briefcase full of reports and the quiet conviction: *this time it will be different*.

Every new city came with the same thought – *this time it will be different*. At least for a while.

*

Her first meeting with the Singapore team took place on a Monday morning in the conference room on the twenty-eighth floor. Through the tall windows, the ships in the harbour looked like toys scattered across the sea. Maya sat on the right-hand side of the regional director, David Marshall from London.

She was the only woman on that side of the table.

“Good work on those numbers, Ryan,” David said to the project assistant, who had prepared two introductory slides.

Maya had prepared forty-seven. Over four nights.

“Thank you,” she said calmly, “but I prepared the presentation.”

David turned to her with genuine surprise.

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry, I didn’t notice.”

And he went back to the screen.

Maya sat through the rest of the meeting as if watching herself from a distance. Something inside her had gone very quiet – quieter than anger, quieter than hurt.

I’m here, and I’m not.

*

After the meeting, Priscilla Tan – head of compliance and the only person who had remained silent throughout, taking notes with the precision of a surgeon – approached Maya in the corridor.

“Your model is correct. But if you present it that way, Tan Wei will reject it.”

“Oh... Why?”

“Because it’s too literal. Too certain.” Priscilla spoke quietly but precisely. “Tan Wei comes from a Chinese-Singaporean background. Direct criticism of a superior means a loss of face for both sides. When you state outright that the data points to a flaw in his strategy – even if you’re right – he hears: ‘You’ve made a mistake’. And he’ll retreat.”

“But I’m presenting data, not criticising his strategy.”

“I know. But he doesn’t see it that way. Ask. Don’t state.” Priscilla gave a small, resigned shrug. “It may not be fair, but it works.”

Maya followed the advice in the next meeting with Tan Wei. He was delighted with his own conclusions – which were, of course, Maya’s.

That evening she wrote to her mother: “I’ve learned a new language.”

Her mother replied: “Which one?”

“The language of questions asked instead of answers given.”

*

Singapore taught her for a year. Not only how the meritocratic system and the compliance department worked, but how to read context.

In Singaporean business culture – a delicate blend of Confucian hierarchy, British pragmatism, and Chinese face-saving – what you said was often far less important than how you said it and in front of whom. Maya, raised on Singaporean multilingualism, understood these layers intellectually. In the corporate world, she learned to feel them with her body.

She learned, for example, that when her Singaporean colleague Lee said “That’s an interesting approach” it meant “No”. That when he said “we’ll consider it” it meant “Probably not”. That silence after a proposal was not agreement but the Singaporean version of disagreement.

And that all of this was perfectly normal and expected – but only if you knew the code. The Europeans in the office – those delegated from London or Frankfurt – did not know the code. They left meetings convinced that everything had been settled, while the local staff knew that nothing had been settled at all.

Maya existed in between. She understood both sides, yet neither side fully understood her.

*

From Singapore she moved to Hanoi. A two-and-a-half-hour flight. On the approach, the Red River delta unfolded below, its green-brown fields veined with countless canals.

Linh Nguyễn was waiting for her at arrivals, holding a small handwritten sign.

In the taxi, crawling through forty minutes of traffic that Linh called “normal”, they talked about the weather, the office, and the fact that Linh knew a great place for phở. Maya was hungry and the phở turned out to be the best she had eaten in months.

*

Vietnam was a new lesson. Singaporean hierarchy was vertical and overt: you knew who stood above you because they carried a title. In Vietnam, hierarchy was vertical and hidden: you knew who stood above you by watching who spoke first, who poured the tea, and who sat on which side of the table.

At her first meeting with Director Nguyễn Đức Minh, Maya spoke directly, exactly as she would have in London or Singapore.

The room fell silent for a beat. Linh, sitting beside her, discreetly touched her knee under the table.

After the meeting, Linh said: “In Vietnam you don’t question a superior in public. Even if you’re right – especially if you’re right. You can say it privately, later, through a third person, or by asking a question that is essentially a statement.”

“How many layers of communication do you have?” Maya asked.

“As many as you need,” Linh replied calmly. “It depends on what you want to say and to whom.”

*

Maya spent a year in Hanoi. She learned a few things: how to order iced coffee that actually arrived iced, how to navigate the city on a scooter, how to plant ideas so that Director Minh believed they were his own.

Most importantly, she learned how to talk to Linh – in the evenings, over cold *Bia Hôi* by the lake – about the things neither of them would ever say in the office.

One night Maya asked, “What do you really want?”

Linh was quiet for a long moment. On the dark water, turtles swam, barely visible.

“I want to say ‘no’ once,” she said softly, “and not feel guilty afterwards.”

*

Warsaw was the third stop. She flew via Frankfurt because she liked Frankfurt – cold, efficient, and nobody spoke to you in the queue. At Warsaw's Okęcie Airport, a text from her new boss was already waiting: “Tomorrow morning at 8.30 I have a slot for you.”

A slot. Not a meeting. A slot, as if I would not be a person.

*

In Poland, invisibility had a new flavour. In Singapore she had been “too Western”. In Hanoi she had been “too Singaporean”. In Warsaw she was simply “the one from Asia” – hardworking, technical, efficient, but not the sort of candidate they imagined when they spoke of vision or leadership.

Yet Warsaw also gave her something new: Zofia Kamińska, who said the things others only dared to whisper, and Agnieszka Wróbel, who carried her notebook like a shield. And, through Zofia, the rest of them.

One Sunday evening, sitting by the window with a cup of hot tea, Maya opened the file named “Personal – do not open” and typed a single line:

“I remember who I was before I learned to make myself smaller.”

*

One of the first things Maya learned in Warsaw was the Polish “yes”. In Singapore, “yes” meant yes. In Hanoi, “yes” usually meant “I understand, but I don’t agree – and we’ll find another way to say it later.” In Poland, “yes” in a meeting could mean only one thing: *yes, I understand what you’re saying*. I did not mean yes, *we’ll do that*.

She learned this the hard way during her first quarterly review, when she presented a proposal to update the risk model. Everyone around the table nodded.

Piotr Wilczewski said: “Yes, that’s an interesting approach.”

Grzegorz from controlling added: “Yes, it’s worth looking into.”

Director Jankowski concluded: “Yes, I see potential here.”

Maya left the room convinced the project had been approved.

Two weeks later, the proposal had quietly vanished from every action plan.

When she asked Piotr what had happened, he looked at her with the expression of a man who had just realised something important had never been said aloud.

“Well... no one formally approved it.”

“But everyone said yes.”

“Maya...” Piotr hesitated. “Here, ‘yes’ in a meeting is not approval. It’s... politeness. It’s a way of not saying no to your face.”

Maya stared at him.

“So what does real approval look like?”

“An email. Or an item on the agenda of the next meeting with a clear owner assigned.”

She wrote it down.

The Polish “yes” required written confirmation.

But there was a second, subtler layer she only understood weeks later: when Poles wanted to say no, they rarely said it directly either. They said, “That’s interesting, but maybe we should wait for more data.” Or “I see certain risks that should be addressed earlier.” Or they simply stayed silent – because silence at the conference table often meant no, but no one wanted to be the one who killed the idea.

Maya came from a culture where silence was polite. In Singapore, silence after a proposal could mean respect or reflection. In Warsaw, silence carried a different weight, and its meaning shifted depending on who remained quiet and when.

*

There was another problem: the informal meetings. In Singapore, networking happened at hawker centres over loud shared meals where everyone spoke across everyone else. Hierarchy was visible, but the table was equal.

In Poland, networking happened after hours, over alcohol, in places Maya was not always invited to. Not out of malice – simply because these were spaces where “insiders” spoke to “insiders”. And no matter how competent or respected she was, Maya remained “the one from Asia”.

One evening, after an important client meeting, the team went for a beer. Maya joined them. At the bar, Piotr and Grzegorz began dissecting the meeting – what they really thought of the client’s proposal, what was wrong with it, and what strategy they should adopt.

Maya listened carefully and took mental notes. This was where the real decisions were made – not at the conference table, but here, over beer, in rapid Polish, without PowerPoint slides.

After an hour, it dawned on her: this was why she had always felt slightly on the outside of decisions, even though she was formally part of the process. The real conversations happened in these informal settings, and she had to concentrate harder than the others. Her Polish was fluent, but there was still a small delay – invisible in the conference room, but noticeable at the bar.

She drank a beer she didn’t particularly like and made a quiet resolution: she would come to every informal gathering from now on.

She didn’t enjoy bars, but here the decisions were actually made. Some sacrifices didn’t require passion, only presence – and she had learned, finally, that presence was the price of admission to the rooms where things actually happened. She decided that she would pay it.

*

The first episode came on a Wednesday morning on the Underground.

The carriage was full of people in winter coats, the air thick and stale. Nothing unusual. Then, without warning, her heart began to race. Much too fast. Maya gripped the rail as the ground seemed to drop away beneath her feet, even though she was still standing. She searched for something rational to hold on to.

Maybe it's too hot. Maybe I didn't sleep enough. Maybe it was something I ate.

She got off at Centralny, leaned against a pillar, and waited for the wave to pass. It did, after a few long minutes. She arrived at the office fifteen minutes late and sat through the entire morning feeling as though she were behind glass – present, yet strangely detached.

That evening she typed a note into her phone:

“Wednesday, 8 March - possible hypoglycaemia. Check blood sugar.”

She checked. The results came back normal.

*

The second episode came three weeks later, during a board meeting. Maya was presenting the quarterly results. She knew the numbers by heart; she had prepared the presentation herself, and the slides had been ready for a week. Halfway through the second slide, her heart began to race again. This time it brought company: her palms turned damp, her chest tightened as if someone were squeezing it, and an uninvited thought pushed its way in:

I'm going to faint.

She didn't faint. She continued speaking in a calm, steady voice, without a single visible pause. She finished the presentation. She answered every question. No one noticed anything.

After the meeting, she locked herself in the toilet and stood by the basin for five minutes, watching water run from the tap.

Nothing happened, she told herself.

Nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

You were tired.

You were overloaded.

It was only stress.

Stress – a convenient name for something she did not yet want to name.

*

Over the following months the episodes came irregularly, but more and more often. Maya started documenting them in a spreadsheet because Excel was her language; in Excel she could think clearly. She created columns: Date, Time, Location, Preceding event, Duration, Intensity (1-10).

The intensity was rising.

In July, exactly one year after the first episode on the Underground, she woke at three in the morning with her heart pounding so violently that for a few terrifying seconds she was certain she was dying. Absolutely certain. As certain as she had ever been of anything – that this was the end, that her heart would stop any second, that she wouldn't make it to hospital.

She got out of bed and sat on the floor, back against the wall, counting her breaths. One... two... three... four.

The attack lasted nineteen minutes.

She watched the clock because it was something real and steady. 3:47. 3:52. 3:58. 4:06.

At four o'clock she wrote to Linh: "Are you awake?"

Linh replied within a minute: "Yes. What's happened?"

"I think I'm having panic attacks. I've just got up off the floor."

"Go to a doctor. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I have a meeting with London."

"Go after the meeting with London."

Maya stared at the screen for a long while. Then she typed: "I thought I was dying."

Linh answered: "I know. That's what it feels like. But you're not dying. Your body is telling you something is wrong. Listen to it."

Maya put the phone down and sat by the window. Outside, Warsaw was dark and quiet.

Your body is telling you something is wrong.

All her professional life she had learned to read data – risk models, market indicators, exchange rates. She had learned to read faces in meetings and silence in emails.

She had never learned to read her own body.

She went to see the doctor. The diagnosis was straightforward: panic attacks, classic presentation, clearly triggered by chronic professional overload and long-term stress. The doctor suggested therapy.

Maya asked: “Is there a medication I can take while still functioning normally?”

“Yes,” the doctor replied, “but medication won’t remove the cause.”

She took the prescription anyway.

In the taxi on the way back to the office, she stared out of the window and kept returning to that sentence: *medication won’t remove the cause.*

The cause had been growing inside her for years – built slowly, methodically through thousands of small, daily decisions: pushing herself harder to prove that she belongs, taking up as little space as possible, never being too loud, always delivering results, never standing out too much, and above all, not feeling.

Now her body had finally decided to speak.

*

Maya signed up for therapy three weeks later. She told herself it was practical – something to say she had tried, in case anyone ever asked why she hadn’t. She did not expect it to matter.

The therapist’s name was Joanna. She spoke in a calm, measured voice that at first irritated Maya – it felt too gentle for the chaos Maya carried inside her.

In the first session, Joanna asked: “When do you feel safe?”

Maya thought for a moment.

“When I deliver results,” she answered.

Joanna wrote it down without comment.

Maya went home and for the next week could not stop thinking about what she had said.

Safe when I deliver results.

Not when she was with people she liked. Not when she was healthy. Not when she slept well. Only when she delivered results.

She tried, a few times, to argue herself out of it. Everyone feels good about doing their job well, she told herself. That's just competence not a symptom. But competence didn't explain the particular quality of the feeling – the way her chest unclenched only after the email went out, the deck was approved, the number was hit. It didn't explain why, on the rare Sunday with nothing to deliver, she felt not restful but exposed, as if she'd been asked to walk into a room with no clothes on.

That was the first sentence from therapy that really stopped her.

*"I chose the love of harmony over the love of myself.
Only when I understood the cost did I begin to pay
differently."*

Chapter 2

Priscilla – The Art of Checking

Priscilla Tan did not make mistakes. It had been a documented fact for over eleven years. Her reports were used by the Monetary Authority of Singapore as a benchmark. A signature from Priscilla Tan meant one thing: *checked to the highest standard*. The cost was also well known: she hadn't slept well since 2019.

*

Priscilla grew up in Bishan, in a family with deep roots in Fujian – the south-eastern Chinese province from which generations had emigrated to Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand. Her family carried a clear diasporic creed: work twice as hard, because you do not have the right to make mistakes. Mistakes were a luxury reserved for those who belonged. You were always, in some way, a guest. Her father was an engineer at Shell. Her mother taught mathematics. Her older brother became a doctor. Priscilla read Law and Finance at Oxford.

“What will people say?” – a sentence she heard throughout her childhood 别人会怎么说. It was the outer limit of the world.

*

At Oxford, Priscilla discovered two things: that she was more intelligent than most of her cohort, and that being more intelligent was not enough to feel she was enough.

In tutorials, she sat face to face with her tutor. The other students – English boys from public schools and Scots from academic families – spoke with the effortless confidence of those who had never doubted that their words were worth hearing. Priscilla checked every sentence three times before she allowed herself to speak once.

She learned to check three times as a way of life.

*

The bank was a place where that philosophy delivered results.

Winston Chow – her first boss and Chief Compliance Officer – seemed, in the early years, like a true mentor. He gave her important projects, defended her in appraisals, and told her she was “one of the best I’ve seen”.

“One of the best.”

Priscilla heard in those words: *You are enough.*

She did not hear the quieter, more dangerous part: “one of.” That “one of the best” was not the same as simply “the best.”

The cost of always being right is that you can’t afford to be seen needing anything.

*

It was 2019 when Farah – the secretary who had worked at the bank for twenty years and knew more about everyone than HR ever would – came to Priscilla’s office with a tray of coffee and said, more quietly than usual: “Miss Tan, I think you should know...”

Farah told her that Winston Chow had remarked at a closed board meeting – through a door left slightly ajar – that Priscilla was “a pretty little doll on their team.”

She listened without expression, said “Thank you,” and quietly closed the door.

Then she sat perfectly still for an hour before opening a new file and filling it with rows.

Her analyses, his signature.

Her concepts, his presentation.

Her recommendations, his promotion.

After a week she had two hundred and forty-seven rows.

*

Two months after the “doll” comment, Winston invited her to dinner at a restaurant in Marina Bay. A table for two. Priscilla accepted because she wanted to see how far he would go.

Over the chocolate mousse – which she would remember in every detail – he placed his hand on hers and said he saw in her the potential for “something more,” something that should be discussed “privately”.

Priscilla withdrew her hand calmly. She finished the dessert. Then she looked at him and said, “Thank you for dinner. I’ll send the KYC memorandum tomorrow morning.” Then she left.

In the taxi she thought about Clarissa from the risk department, who had spoken up about her boss a year earlier and then left the bank.

Priscilla had chosen to stay. And to document everything. She was never certain it was the right choice. But it was hers.

*

When Maya arrived at the Singapore branch, Priscilla watched her for a week before she approached her. She always watched new people – studying their patterns the way one studies the grammar of a foreign language.

Priscilla had a quiet thesis: Western expatriates in Asia were taught procedures, never cultures. They learned how to run a meeting with a Japanese client, how to greet a senior Chinese executive, and what never to say to a Thai colleague. They were not taught *why*.

And that difference – between procedural knowledge and true cultural understanding – was the silent gulf through which, every year, countless projects, relationships, and women like Priscilla – the natural bridges between worlds – fell without anyone assigning it so much as a KPI.

*

Priscilla fainted for the first time on a Friday morning, at Raffles Place station.

There was no warning. She was standing in the usual eight o'clock queue at the gates, bag over her shoulder, phone in hand, reading an email from the lawyer – a long legal analysis on KYC procedure in a new market, twelve pages, fine print. Nothing unusual.

First came the ringing in her ears. Then the slow dimming of the world, like lights fading in a cinema. Then the floor.

She woke up on the cold tiles, her head near the gate, her phone lying just centimetres from her hand. A woman in a yellow SMRT vest was leaning over her, saying something urgently in English and in Mandarin. For a few seconds Priscilla didn't know where she was.

Then reality returned. Raffles Place. Friday. 8:13 a.m.

"I don't need medical assistance," she said automatically, before she'd had a chance to consider whether that was true.

"Madam, we've already called the paramedics," the woman replied.

They arrived in three minutes. Priscilla sat against the wall and answered their questions with the same calm precision she used in the boardroom – blood pressure, pulse, headache, diabetes, what had she eaten.

"Did you have breakfast?" one paramedic asked.

Priscilla thought for a moment.

"I just had a coffee."

"Just a coffee?"

"I had dinner yesterday."

The paramedic looked at her in surprise.

"Yesterday evening?"

"At five. There was a meeting until ten, then I worked late. I didn't have time."

The paramedic wrote it down with the quiet expression of someone who had heard this story many times before.

*

Priscilla reached the office at ten – an hour and forty minutes later than planned. She sent her secretary a brief message: “Comms delay. Apologies.”

She did not mention that she had been lying on the tiles by the MRT gates.

For the rest of the day she worked as usual. She ate a sandwich at her desk in fifteen minutes and returned to the report.

Only in the evening, at home, did she allow herself to think about what had actually happened throughout the day. Not the logistics. Not the excuse she'd need to give. Not the unfinished report. She thought about collapsing onto the cold tiles of the MRT station. About eating only one sandwich the day before, at five o'clock, and thinking nothing of it. About how, for months, she had treated her body like a machine to be serviced, rather than something that could send warning signs.

She took a sheet of paper and drew two columns.

Left: what her body had been trying to tell her.

Right: what she had answered.

Headaches since Monday. – I took a paracetamol.

Waking at four in the morning. – I checked my emails.

Trembling hands before important meetings. – I had a second coffee.

Dizziness when standing up. – I stood up too quickly.

I fainted. –

The right-hand column remained empty.

Priscilla stared at that blank space for a long time. For the first time, she had no answer.

*

The doctor she saw on Monday was blunt.

“Your nervous system is in a state of chronic overload. Classic symptoms – hypoglycaemia from irregular eating, disrupted sleep, chronically elevated cortisol. There is nothing structurally wrong, but your body has reached the limit of its compensation.”

Priscilla looked at him.

“What does it mean – the limit of its compensation?”

“It means that until now, your body has been coping. It has been compensating for very poor conditions. Now it’s telling you: I can’t do this anymore. You need to change the conditions.”

Priscilla wrote the words down carefully, exactly as she would in a meeting with the legal team.

Your nervous system has reached the limit of its compensation.

All her life she had learned to read systems – procedures, regulations, risk indicators. She could spot when a system was overloaded, when it was approaching collapse, when intervention was required.

She had simply never learned that she herself was a system.

*

The first change she made was breakfast.

Every morning, before leaving the house, she sat at the table without her phone. Twelve minutes. No emails. No messages. Just food and silence. It felt like a prayer. Or a meditation.

It seemed trivially small compared to the storm she was carrying inside. And that was exactly why she started there.

"Đời người như cánh hoa, nở rồi lại tàn.

*A human life is like a flower – it blooms and then
falls. But nobody tells us we can choose the season of
our blooming."*

– a Vietnamese proverb, adapted by the author

Chapter 3

Linh – The String of Harmony

Linh Nguyễn knew exactly how to be liked. She always arrived earlier than everyone else and left later. She remembered every birthday – from the director down to Ms. Hương, who cleaned the office at six in the morning. She brought biscuits to every meeting and said yes to every request. Everybody loved her for it. For five years, she had had no time left for herself.

*

Hanoi is a city of paradoxes: modern skyscrapers rising beside ancient pagodas from the Lý dynasty, women in graceful *áo dài* walking alongside women in sharp business suits. Vietnam is changing at a speed that forces one constant question: what should we keep from the old, and what should we leave behind?

Linh took from both worlds. From the traditional, she inherited Confucian values: social harmony, respect for hierarchy, and the quiet virtue of patience. From the new, she took a good degree, sharp ambition, and an English CV filled with experiences across four continents.

The trouble was that both worlds demanded the same thing of her: Linh was to serve others.

*

Vietnamese Confucianism carries a particular weight: the hierarchy is vertical and absolute, yet the harmony is everyone's duty. The subordinate must show respect to the superior, but the superior is equally bound to care for the subordinate as one would for family. When that duty is neglected, the entire system falters.

For years Linh had watched directors accept the support, loyalty, and care of their subordinates while giving almost nothing in return. And she had remained silent, because to question the hierarchy would disturb the harmony – and harmony, she had been taught, mattered more than fairness.

They were sitting by the lake when she said to Maya: “Harmony mattered more than fairness.”

It was one of the hardest sentences she had ever spoken aloud.

Maya listened quietly.

“I’m not saying it was a mistake,” Linh added. “I’m saying I paid a price for it without even realising the cost.”

*

Director Nguyễn Đức Minh liked Linh for her efficiency, for her lack of problems, and for the fact that she never asked difficult questions.

He did not see the sharp analyst who could anticipate risks faster than anyone else in the room. He saw only someone who “managed the team well” and was “always helpful”.

“Manages well.”

“Always helpful.”

Phrases that sounded like compliments, yet closed around her like a cage.

At meetings, Director Minh presented her reports as “our analysis”. When difficult questions arose, he passed them to Linh. When compliments came, he accepted them graciously on behalf of the department. Linh quietly filled the space between “he speaks” and “she knows”, and no one seemed to mind that those two things belonged to different people.

*

The story Linh did not tell Maya that night – the one she shared only later, when Maya wrote, “I think I’m alive too” – happened during a business trip to Hồ Chí Minh City.

It was a conference dinner. Trần Quốc Hùng, the chief operating officer at the time, had drunk too much. In the hotel lift, when they were finally alone, he looked into her eyes and slid a hand into her hair. Linh got out on her floor, said “Goodnight,” closed the door behind her, and sat fully dressed on the bed for what felt like an hour, breathing heavily.

She thought about bamboo – how it bends in the wind but does not break. From birth, Vietnamese women are told: be like bamboo. Be supple. Be enduring. Survive. In Vietnam, it is meant as the highest compliment.

Then she thought of something else.

She remembered the water puppets – *rối nước* – her grandmother had taken her to see as a child at Thăng Long Water Puppet Theatre near Hoàn Kiếm Lake.

Wooden figures dancing gracefully on the surface of the water, controlled by hidden strings beneath. Also made of bamboo. Also supple. Also enduring. Also moved by someone you could not see.

*

For two years she carried it alone. She always had an evacuation plan from every room. She always sat with her back to the wall.

When Trần Quốc Hùng finally left for a competitor, Linh felt something inside her loosen – a knot she hadn't realised was there. Only then did she understand how tightly it had been wound.

*

When Maya arrived, Linh looked after her with quiet care – and one hidden motive.

She didn't want Maya to learn the system the way she herself had: painfully, through trial and error, through small humiliations and silent lessons.

She showed her the best flat, the good restaurants, the essential apps, and how the local public transport worked. And, almost in passing, she added one careful sentence: "Avoid being alone with Director Minh after four o'clock."

Maya looked at her for a moment, then said simply, "Thank you." She didn't ask for details.

*

The evenings by Hoàn Kiếm Lake became their shared ritual. Plastic stools, cold *Bia Hôi*, and turtles barely visible in the dark water.

“Tell me something about yourself,” Maya said one night. “But not about work, please.”

So Linh told her. About her father, who had taught her to ride a bicycle. About her mother, who made *bánh cuốn* on every Sunday morning. About her sister in Đà Nẵng, who had just given birth to twins.

“Do you like to cook?” Maya asked.

“I love it,” Linh replied, her gaze drifting across the water. “But I never have time. There’s a dish – *bò kho* – beef stew with star anise and lemongrass. I make it every Tết. My mother used to say I made it better than she did.”

She paused.

“She died five years ago.”

A gentle silence settled between them.

“I’m glad I told you,” Linh said quietly. “I rarely talk about her at work. It’s as if my mother doesn’t belong on a CV.”

*

A few months after Maya left Hanoi, Linh wrote to her in the middle of the week: “I said ‘no’ at a meeting today. Director Minh looked as if someone had suddenly cut off his internet.”

Maya replied almost immediately: “How did it feel?”

“Strange,” Linh wrote. “But good. Like jumping from a high cliff into the water.”

Maya smiled at her phone and typed back: “That’s exactly what it’s like.”

*

In the year the bank introduced a new Western-style appraisal system based on “direct feedback”, Linh was tasked with conducting annual reviews for the ten people on her team.

The instructions were clear: be direct. Tell each employee what they were doing well and what they needed to improve. Give concrete examples. No softening. No indirect language.

Linh understood the theory. She also understood her team. Most of them were Vietnamese, and the most senior among them – Nguyễn Văn Thành, fifty-seven years old, with twenty-four years at the company – had never once in his career heard direct criticism from a superior. Any feedback had always come through a third person, wrapped carefully in layers of politeness to preserve his dignity.

She began the reviews according to the new rules.

With Thành, she sat face-to-face in a small meeting room, no desk between them, exactly as the guidebook required.

“Thành,” she said, “your work on the Q2 project was solid. I especially appreciated your reliability and how well you met deadlines. There is one area I’d like you to focus on moving forward: communication during crisis situations. On a few occasions, information reached the team too late.”

Thành listened in silence. His face remained perfectly still.

“I understand,” he said.

Linh waited.

“I’ll do my best,” he added.

And that was the end of the conversation.

*

The next day, Linh learned from another team member that Thành had been visibly subdued after their conversation. He had told his colleagues he had “failed to meet the boss’s expectations”.

For an entire week he worked with excessive caution, consulting on even the smallest decision, as if terrified of making another mistake. Only then did Linh understand what had happened.

In Vietnamese professional culture, criticism from a superior – even when gentle and balanced with praise – is understood as a public declaration of failure. The wrapping does not matter.

Thành had heard: *you have let me down*.

Linh had said: *there’s one area to improve*.

The same sentence. Two entirely different readings.

*

The next day, Linh went to see Thành. Not in a meeting room with a guidebook, but over coffee during a break.

“Thành, I wanted to check that we understood each other after yesterday’s conversation.”

“Of course, Ms Linh. I understand,” he replied.

She knew that wasn’t an answer, just politeness.

“I’m asking because I’ve noticed you’ve been working differently since then. I want to be very clear: your work is valuable. What I mentioned about crisis communication is a small point that can be improved. It doesn’t change how highly I think of you as an employee.”

Thành looked at her for a moment, then said something she hadn’t expected.

“Ms Linh, this new system... the way we speak is different now. In our culture, when something is wrong, it is usually said through someone else, or by giving a different assignment, or by example. Not directly. So when you spoke to me directly, I assumed it was much more serious than you intended.”

“So the more directly I speak, the more seriously you take it?”

“Yes,” he said. “Because normally we only speak directly when something is very wrong.”

That evening, Linh wrote to Maya:

“I discovered today that my ‘direct feedback’ is being read as an alarm. In our culture, directness signals seriousness.”

Maya replied quickly: “It’s the opposite for me. In Singapore I thought silence after a proposal meant reflection. In Warsaw it means refusal.”

“And neither of us got a manual.”

“No,” Maya wrote. “We had to stumble through it and learn the hard way.”

*"Trust is built over years and lost in a second. Real
courage is trusting again in spite of that."*

Chapter 4

Zofia – The Polish Fortress

Zofia Kamińska remembered exactly the day she learned not to trust.

It was a Thursday, thirteen years ago. Krzysztof Wierzbicki – her mentor at the time – stood up in a meeting and proposed “a simplification of the management structure”. In one clean move, Zofia lost a project she had spent two years building. Krzysztof got a more senior position.

Later, in a one-to-one meeting, he looked at her and said: “Zofia, it wasn’t personal. Business is business.”

“I understand,” she replied.

She didn’t understand at all. But she remembered.

*

Before Krzysztof there was Marek Sobczak – her first boss and a master of soft shaping.

He never did anything overtly wrong. He invited her to lunches “to discuss her development”. He gave her feedback in calm, reasonable tones:

“Zofia, this report is accurate, but your style of argument is a little confrontational.”

“Zofia, you were excellent in the meeting, but Tomasz clearly felt dominated.”

“Zofia, you have a tendency to reach conclusions too quickly. It can come across as arrogant.”

Each comment, taken by itself, was defensible. Taken together – week after week, for an entire year – they formed a quiet curriculum on how to make herself smaller.

*

Zofia sometimes wondered whether Marek Sobczak had done it consciously – whether he knew he was shaping her like clay.

She eventually concluded he hadn’t. He was simply the product of a system that rewards men for taking up space and women for giving it up. He was passing the logic on, sincerely believing he was helping her.

That was the hardest conclusion: *harm does not require ill will.*

*

The turning point came at a board meeting. Marek spoke for twenty minutes, using the first-person plural the entire time: “we identified”, “we assess”, “we recommend”. Zofia said five sentences. She had prepared the entire analysis alone, working on it over three weeks.

After the meeting, she confronted him directly.

“Zofia, that was a team piece of work.”

“I wrote it on my own.”

“You worked on the team’s data,” he replied. “That’s different.”

She looked at him and realised: he genuinely believed it. Her work had become “the team’s data”. His presentation remained his presentation.

It was institutionalised, impersonal, and entirely sincere invisibility.

*

The Polish corporate world had its own particular rules, shaped by a national history that taught survival through distrust of the system. Zofia carried that inheritance in her bones. Her parents’ generation had learned the lesson well: don’t say too much, don’t trust institutions, build your own networks and support systems.

Paradoxically, in the bank this philosophy only strengthened the existing system. Everyone played carefully. Everyone built private alliances. Information became a currency traded selectively. Zofia understood these unwritten rules perfectly – and she played the game better than most.

But the game consumed the energy she would rather have spent on living.

*

Maya Krishnan joined Zofia’s department three weeks after arriving in Warsaw.

“Krishnan, there’s a gap in your assumptions about the CHF,” Zofia said during their first review.

“I see,” Maya replied calmly. “I’ll fix it by Friday.”

Zofia narrowed her eyes.

Most people would have defended themselves, made excuses, or at least tried to explain. Maya did none of those things. This was unexpected.

*

At the photocopier, at 7.30 p.m., when the rest of the office had emptied out, Zofia said:

“Do you know what I don’t like about the word ‘mentor’? It assumes goodwill.”

Maya looked up from her documents.

“My first boss spent a year teaching me that I took up too much space. And for a whole year I corrected myself. I thought I was making progress.”

Zofia slid another sheet into the machine.

“I was a puppet on his string long before I realised this kind of theatre even existed.”

She paused.

“And now?” Maya asked.

“Now I don’t let anyone even come close to me, to avoid strings being attached,” Zofia said quietly. “But the price is that I no longer trust the ones I could.”

*

Emilka was ten and beat her mother at cards every time Zofia played seriously.

“You’re better than me,” Zofia would say.

And it was true.

Every other weekend the radar fell silent. They made *pierogi* together, watched films, and Emilka gossiped about school. Zofia listened with a smile and thought:

I hope Emilka never learns this constant calibration – how much is too much, how much is too little.

And then came the harder thought:

And how do I protect her from it, without even telling her there is something she needs to be protected from?

*

Zofia had one recurring point of contention with Maya – and with almost every non-Polish colleague: her emails.

She wrote the way she thought: short, precise, without preambles. Asked for a project status, she replied: “Two-week delay owing to missing data from IT.” Nothing more. No “Good morning,” no “Thank you,” no polite padding.

In Poland, this style was read as professionalism – respect for the recipient’s time. In Singapore it was read as hostility. She only discovered this a year after Maya’s arrival in Warsaw.

Over coffee, Maya said carefully, “Zofia, can I ask you something? Last week I received an email from you about the currency portfolio status. Had something upset you at the time?”

Zofia narrowed her eyes.

“No. Why?”

“Because the email sounded... cold. In Singapore, an email like that usually means that the sender is angry with you. Or that the question itself was inappropriate.”

Zofia stared at her.

“It was a project status update. It contained exactly what was needed.”

“I know it seems illogical,” Maya said gently. “But culture isn’t always logical.”

Zofia was quiet for a moment.

“So you spent a whole year thinking I was angry with you?”

“Not the whole year,” Maya replied with a smile. “But for the first few weeks, every time I got an email from you, I wondered what I had done wrong.”

*

Zofia returned to her desk and opened her inbox. She reread the last few emails she had sent to Maya, to her Singapore colleagues, and to the new hire from Korea.

Seen through someone else’s eyes, they were undeniably terse. Precise. Almost cold.

She wrote to Maya: “You’re right. I didn’t realise terseness had a temperature.”

Maya replied quickly: “In Poland, a cold email means efficiency. In Singapore, a cold email means a problematic relationship.”

Zofia stared at the screen.

“And nobody tells anyone this?”

“Nobody,” Maya wrote. “It’s assumed that everyone understands the same words the same way.”

Zofia sat for a moment, then did something she had never done before in her professional life. She began an email to Maya with: “Hi Maya, hope your week is off to a good start.”

It felt strange. Almost unnatural. But she sent it.

Maya replied within a minute: “Zofia! Were you really like this the whole time?”

Zofia read it and, for the first time in a long while, laughed out loud at her desk.

The Puppet Theatre

In the corporate puppet theatre there is no stage. There is only an open-plan floor, glass meeting rooms, crowded lift cabins, restaurants at Marina Bay, and cafés in Mokotów. The puppets are well dressed. They hold degrees from prestigious universities. They have KPIs, OKRs, and annual targets.

Their strings are invisible.

*

The shadow factory runs around the clock.

It has no walls, no machines. It has only systems, hierarchies, and silent rules passed through observation:

Look how she does it. Do what she does. Don't ask why.

Millions of women have passed through this factory.

Some emerged as finished products – smooth, capable, perfectly shaped.

Some never came out.

And some began to understand exactly what was being manufactured.

*

Puppets have their own legs.

The factory forgets that.

*"A woman's silence is not proof of her consent.
It is proof of what she has been taught."*

Chapter 5

Agnieszka – The Documentalist

Agnieszka Wróbel started work at the bank with a notebook in her hand.

It was an ordinary black A5 notebook, bought at Empik on the way to her first day. She had carried one ever since Tomek – ever since she learned that memory is subjective, but paper is not.

At the bank, the notebook found a new purpose.

“11 March – my idea for the ESG portfolio was taken over by Marek. He presented it as his own.”

“2 April – my recommendation on the candidate was ignored. I was right.”

“17 May – promotion went to Karol. He had a year less experience, two fewer major projects, and a weaker appraisal.”

The notebook had a hundred and thirty pages.

*

Before she joined the bank, she had met Tomek. Three years together. A flat in Wola. A cat called The Bill who slept between them. Tomek never hit her. That became the central line in the story she told herself for three years: *It isn't violence.*

“You see it that way, but you know your interpretation is often wrong.”

“Don’t get worked up, your drama is really hard for me.”

“I don’t remember saying that. You might have misheard.”

Year one: Agnieszka believed she had a bad memory.

Year two: she believed she was too sensitive.

Year three: she no longer knew what was true.

So she bought a notebook and started writing things down.

*

The thin scar on her wrist came from the night Tomek grabbed her hard as she tried to leave during an argument.

“You’re not going anywhere until we finish talking.”

She pulled free. The edge of his watch cut a clean line across her skin.

For a long time she told herself it had been an accident. Just a watch. He had been frightened, he hadn’t meant to hurt her, and it would never happen again.

And it never did happen again – not with his hands.

Instead, he began to hold her with words. With silence. With the perfectly timed question asked in just the right tone – calibrated to wound exactly enough, never enough to leave a mark she could show another person.

A year later, Agnieszka took her notebook, two suitcases, and left.

*

At the bank, the mechanisms had a different shape but the same structure.

Grzegorz Malinowski, her line manager, leaned back in his chair during her performance review and said: “Agnieszka, I get the impression that you have a problem with an emotional approach to certain situations.”

“What emotional approach?”

“Well, you know... that you’re quite sensitive to injustice. It affects how you work with the team.”

“I flag injustices when I see them. That affects collaboration?”

Grzegorz spread his hands with a patient smile. “That’s exactly what I mean. That... intensity.”

Agnieszka left the meeting without a pay rise.

That night she wrote in the notebook:

“Intensity. Being a woman who says she is being treated unfairly is called intensity.”

*

Weronika Szymańska – her direct report – arrived with a fresh degree from SGH and eyes that still carried a dream the system had not yet touched.

Agnieszka wanted to protect that dream. She knew she couldn’t, not fully.

So she told her the small, practical things:

“Don’t start sentences with ‘sorry’.”

“You have a right to an opinion without asking for permission first.”

Weronika listened.

Some of it she absorbed. Some of it the system absorbed faster.

*

At their first coffee, Agnieszka said outright to Maya: “I feel invisible and furious, if you’re asking.”

“That’s a good starting point,” Maya replied.

For several months they met once a week after work, at a small café on Nowy Świat. Maya listened in a way Agnieszka had only ever experienced with a therapist.

One evening Maya asked gently: “What would you do if those injustices suddenly vanished?”

Agnieszka opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I’d know what to do with myself.”

Maya nodded.

“Your vigilance is real. But I wonder whether it hasn’t also become your identity. What would happen if you didn’t have to be that person any more?”

Agnieszka went home and didn’t write in the notebook for three weeks. In the fourth week she bought a new one – smaller, lighter. The first sentence read: “*I left.*”

*

Agnieszka had never thought of herself as someone who struggled with cultural differences. She had always worked in Poland, with Poles, in Polish. Until the project with the Koreans.

The bank was launching a new product in partnership with a Korean financial institution. Agnieszka was assigned as the lead analyst on the Polish side. The first video conference with Seoul was meant to be straightforward: exchange data and agree on a timetable.

She arrived well prepared – five slides of analysis, three clear points to agree on, and a detailed proposed schedule.

Kim Jun-seo, a senior manager in his fifties, calm and precise, listened attentively to her presentation and said: “Very interesting. Thank you for the presentation.”

Agnieszka smiled.

“Great. Shall we move on to the questions?”

“Of course,” Kim Jun-seo replied. “We have a few observations.”

What followed was not a list of questions or minor observations.

As Agnieszka slowly realised, it was a gently phrased but comprehensive list of problems with her proposed timetable. The problem was that she was hearing “observations.” Not problems.

*

Two weeks later, it emerged that the Korean side considered the timetable unagreed and was waiting for a “revised proposal”.

Agnieszka was stunned.

“But they never said they were rejecting it.”

A colleague with experience working with Korean partners explained plainly: “Agnieszka, in Korean business culture, you almost never say ‘no’ directly or ‘this is a problem’. Instead, they say things like ‘we have a few observations’ or ‘this requires further analysis’. It’s a code. ‘Observations’ usually means problems. ‘Requires further analysis’ often means rejection.”

Agnieszka stared at him.

“So how do I know when they’re actually saying yes?”

“When they say: ‘We understand the proposal and we can move to the next step’.”

“That’s a yes?”

“That’s a yes.”

Agnieszka went back and rewatched the video recording of the meeting. This time she listened differently.

Kim Jun-seo had been perfectly polite, calm, and measured. Through the entire call he had never once said, “We understand the proposal and we can move to the next step.” He also hadn’t said: “no.” He had spoken only in the vast, courteous space between the two.

Agnieszka prepared a revised timetable and sent it to Kim Jun-seo with a short email:

“Thank you for the observations from our previous meeting. I have prepared an updated proposal that takes your comments into account.”

Two days later, Kim Jun-seo replied: “We understand the proposal and we can move to the next step.”

Agnieszka read the message and sat still for a moment, feeling something rare at work: the quiet satisfaction of having learned something new. Not the thrill of being cleverer than the others, but the humbling satisfaction of understanding something she had previously missed.

That evening she opened her new, smaller notebook and wrote:

“Not every no looks like no.

Not every yes looks like yes.

The same applies to Grzegorz.”

It took her several days to fully understand that last sentence.

It began innocently, as the worst things often do.

One evening, after a particularly difficult day – the one when Grzegorz had spoken to her about her “intensity” and she had left the meeting without a pay rise – Agnieszka sat at her desk at home, carrying a tension that had no outlet. She didn’t cry. She had taught herself not to. She didn’t shout. There was no one to shout at.

She simply sat with it, this heavy, wordless pressure that filled the entire room.

Then, almost mechanically, without thinking, she slid her fingers under her hair at the back of her head and scratched her scalp.

A small wave of relief washed over her.

Not much. Just enough for the pressure to drop, like air escaping from an overinflated balloon.

She forgot about it and returned to work.

*

The second time happened three weeks later, during a video conference.

Marek Kowalski was once again presenting Agnieszka's analysis as his own. She kept her camera off and scratched her scalp slowly throughout the entire presentation.

When the call ended, she felt noticeably calmer than she had been at the start.

She began to notice the pattern.

Tension.

Scratching.

Relief.

She didn't analyse it. She didn't judge it. She just did it.

*

For months she didn't realise she was doing something that had a name. She thought it was just a tic, a harmless habit – like picking at the skin around your nails. Innocent but ugly.

Then the wounds appeared. Not suddenly. Gradually. She began to scratch harder because lighter scratching no longer brought enough relief. Like any painkiller, the dose had to increase.

One morning, while brushing her hair, she saw them in the mirror: five or six small scabs at the back of her head. Distinct. Unmistakable.

She stopped. She stood still, brush in hand, looking at her own reflection. She applied the same precision she used at work – the precision of a documentalist who gathers evidence – to herself.

When did it start? In the autumn.

When was it worst? After meetings with Grzegorz. After moments where something unjust happened and she could not say it out loud. When the tension had nowhere to go.

She opened the new, smaller notebook and wrote a single sentence:

"I scratch so that I don't scream."

*

She didn't go to a therapist straight away.

For two more months she tried to stop herself, the same way she had always tried to control everything else. But the scratching refused to obey willpower. The harder she fought it, the stronger the urge became.

When she finally sat down in the therapist's office, the woman listened calmly without judgement.

“What you’re describing – seeking physical relief through pain or scratching – is your body’s attempt to release emotional tension that has no other outlet. It couldn’t scream. It couldn’t cry. So it found its own solution.”

Agnieszka was quiet for a moment. She thought about Tomek. About all the years she had swallowed her voice because any sign of anger or sadness would be used against her as proof of “drama” or “emotionality”. Her body had learned the lesson well: emotions are dangerous. So it found a silent, private way to let the pressure out.

“And it carried over into work?” she asked.

“Your body doesn’t distinguish between Tomek and Grzegorz,” the therapist replied gently. “It only recognises where you feel powerless and where the tension has nowhere to go. Then it responds with the only method it has learned.”

Agnieszka sat with that truth for a long while.

Finally she said, “I want to learn a different way out.”

The therapist smiled softly.

“That is exactly why you are sitting here.”

*

Therapy was not straightforward.

Agnieszka was a woman who documented, analysed, and gathered evidence. Therapy asked her for something entirely different: to pause before analysing, and simply sit with the feeling.

She learned it slowly, like a foreign language – with a dictionary, awkward grammar, and many mistakes.

Within four months she stopped scratching. The wounds began to heal. The scabs faded and disappeared.

But the therapist told her gently, “This isn’t the end. This is only a new starting point.”

Agnieszka wrote the sentence down in her small notebook, slowly, the way you write something you want to keep. For years she had collected words as evidence – proof of pain, proof of survival. This time was different. She wrote it as a direction, the first one she had chosen entirely for herself.

*"When a woman says directly what she wants, she is
called 'difficult'. When a man does the same, he is
called 'assertive'.
This is not a difference in character. It is a difference
in expectations."*

Chapter 6

Siti – A Map of Safe Places

Siti Rahimah looked like someone for whom everything always went well.

A degree from NUS, a solid product manager role, a bright flat in Tiong Bahru. A boyfriend, Farhan, who cooked *nihari* on Sundays. A smile she wore every day like an essential piece of her wardrobe.

What you couldn't see was this: Siti could no longer remember the last time she had told anyone at work that she didn't like something.

*

Siti grew up in a Singaporean Malay family – part of a community that is a minority in Singapore, though a majority in neighbouring Malaysia. For generations, they had learned to navigate between dominant Chinese culture and Western modernity while preserving their Muslim identity.

That constant balancing act was both a price and a value.

The price was perpetual adjustment: always monitoring where you stood and who you were allowed to be in any given context.

The value was cultural fluency – the quiet ability to read a room, to notice what others missed.

Siti could tell when a Chinese colleague's silence meant respect and when it meant disagreement. She knew what an Indian superior really meant when he said "we'll consider it." She understood the unspoken rules of Chinese-Singaporean hierarchy as well as the Western demand for directness.

Yet those skills, acquired over a lifetime as a minority, remained invisible to the firm.

No one ever wrote "fluency in multicultural navigation" into her KPIs.

*

Kevin Lim, her line manager, said it during her development review: "Siti, you are an extremely valuable member of the team. But I'm not sure you're ready for the next level. You lack assertiveness."

She smiled politely and replied, "Thank you for the feedback. I'll work on it."

In the lift on the way down, the contradiction hit her.

If she pointed out how illogical it was – that they punished her for lacking assertiveness while rewarding her for being accommodating – it would create conflict.

So she stopped at that thought, as if she had walked into a wall.

*

But Kevin was only a small problem compared to Raymond Foo.

Raymond Foo – a director in a parallel department – had a habit of invading Siti's personal space. He would sit a little too close and speak in a whisper even when there was no need.

In December, after the annual review, Kevin left early. Only Siti, Raymond, and Jonas remained in the meeting room. Five minutes later, Jonas excused himself to fetch some documents and never returned.

Raymond closed the door.

He leaned against the counter, far too close to where Siti was sitting. She could smell the stale sweat on his shirt after a long day.

"Siti, I think we should talk about your career path," he said softly. "Outside the formal channels."

"Thank you," she replied, keeping her voice steady. "I'll pass that on to Kevin."

She stood up, gathered her documents, walked deliberately around the other side of the table, and left the room.

In the corridor, she stopped by the window and stared out at the harbour.

*

At home, Farhan asked if everything was all right.

She answered: "I'm just tired."

She stood under a hot shower for twenty minutes, letting the water run until it turned cold.

She didn't tell Farhan.

For the next week she quietly analysed why.

Was it serious enough? Would it be believed?

She already knew the likely outcome: Raymond would deny it, Kevin would look uncomfortable, and she would return to the office where Raymond would act as if nothing had happened.

So she did one small thing for herself. From that day on, she never allowed herself to be alone with Raymond again. It was a quiet, invisible logistical plan. The energy it cost her, she stole from her work.

*

On Friday evenings, when they could, the three of them – Priscilla, Maya (when she was in town), and Siti – met by the window with its sweeping view of Gardens by the Bay.

“I’m tired of managing maps,” Siti said quietly, looking out at the glittering city. “Where I can go, where I can’t. Who I can sit next to, who I should avoid. It’s a part-time job I do on top of my actual job. And nobody sees it, nobody values it, nobody writes it into my annual targets.”

Priscilla nodded slowly.

“I know.”

Maya looked at her and said the same, softly: “I know.”

That simple, doubled answer was worth more than any HR report ever could be.

*

With Maya, Siti could talk about culture in a way she could nowhere else.

Maya – shaped by Singaporean multilingualism and years spent navigating Singapore, Hanoi, and Warsaw – understood the deeper contradiction.

“Kevin keeps telling me I’m not assertive enough,” Siti said one evening. “But assertiveness, in the Western sense – speaking directly, taking up space, not apologising – is exactly what a Malay girl has been taught all her life is undesirable, even rude.”

Maya nodded.

“So he’s asking you to become someone your culture trained you never to be.”

“Exactly,” Siti replied. “And he doesn’t see that it’s a completely self-contradictory request.”

*

One evening, Farhan looked at her and said gently: “Siti, I don’t know what you want. I ask, and you always say ‘whatever you like’ or ‘whatever you prefer’. I want to know what you want.”

Siti looked at him, searching for an answer.

Farhan had patient eyes and that rare kind of simplicity. He said what he thought, because that was how he believed people should talk. He wasn’t playing games. He wasn’t testing her. He was asking because he genuinely wanted to know.

And that was the hardest part.

It was so much easier to answer questions that already had an expected answer. Easier to read the room, adjust, and give people what they wanted before they even asked. That was the version of Siti she had perfected for years – at the office, with family, with clients, with Kevin, who demanded constant optimism.

Farhan asked differently. He asked with no hidden second meaning.

She sat with this question for a moment, turning it over in her hands like something unfamiliar.

“I want *pad thai* with prawns,” she said. “No peanuts.”

She said it before she could check if it was the “right” answer. Before she could ask whether he felt like Thai food. Before she could soften it with “if you like” or “we could do something else”.

Farhan looked surprised. Then delighted.

He ordered *pad thai* with prawns, no peanuts, and through the entire dinner he seemed a shade happier than usual – as if he had finally been given something he had been waiting a long time for, without knowing he was waiting.

It was a tiny step. And it was hers.

Later that night, Siti sat in the dark for a moment before turning on the light. She thought about how much energy she had spent for years guessing what other people wanted, and how little she had left for asking what *she* wanted.

Pad thai with prawns. No peanuts. So little. And so much.

One Tuesday morning, the office celebrated its anniversary with catering. The kitchen counters were filled with trays of food – *char sin*, roast pork, grilled ribs glistening under the lights.

Siti walked in, took one look at the spread, and quietly left. She picked up a drink from another table and returned to her desk.

No one asked why. Maybe no one noticed. Or maybe they noticed and simply thought nothing of it. After all, everyone knew Siti was Muslim.

She spent the rest of the day carrying a feeling that was hard to name. It wasn't anger or offence. It was something quieter and more chronic: the dull ache of being invisible in a small thing.

The catering was all pork because most of the office was Chinese-Singaporean, and no one had thought about it. Not out of malice. Not out of deliberate exclusion. Simply because no one had remembered. Everyone liked pork, after all.

*

A few days later, Siti told Priscilla about the catering over coffee.

Priscilla listened quietly, then said something Siti hadn't expected: "I have my own version of that. At company dinners, when they order wine and someone pushes the glass towards me saying, 'Priscilla, this is a good vintage, you have to try it' – I have to explain that I don't drink alcohol because of personal conviction. And there's always that small pause. You can see them thinking: 'Oh... really? Why?'"

Siti looked at her, surprised.

“But you’re not Muslim.”

“No,” Priscilla replied. “But I’m a person whose personal decisions are constantly commented on in a context where they should be self-evident and left unquestioned.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

Siti said softly: “Do you think Kevin even noticed that the catering was all pork?”

“Kevin probably didn’t think about it.”

“That’s exactly it,” Siti said. “A minority always has to think. The majority doesn’t. And that asymmetry is never written into any diversity strategy.”

*

For the next company event, Siti wrote to the assistant organising the catering:

“Hi, when you’re ordering the food, could we please include a halal option? There are a few people on the team for whom it matters.”

The assistant replied almost immediately:

“Of course! I didn’t know. Thank you for flagging it.”

Siti read the message and felt something small but important shift inside her. For years, she had assumed that asking for something would create friction, that any need named out loud would be received as complaint. The reply in front of her said otherwise.

Saying what she needed doesn’t have to mean conflict.

Kevin had once told her that her problem was a lack of assertiveness.

Maybe.

But perhaps assertiveness didn't begin with grand speeches in the boardroom. Maybe it began with small, quiet emails like this one – about catering, about halal, about being visible in ordinary things.

It began with a simple sentence:

I have a need, and I'm saying so."

*"I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren
is that they take their feet off our necks."*

— *Sarah Grimké, Letters on the Equality of the Sexes (1837),
abolitionist and one of the earliest American feminist writers*

Chapter 7

Katarzyna – At the Top, Alone

Katarzyna Nowak was, as journalists liked to write, a pioneer. The first woman to hold the position of Managing Director at the Polish branch of EurAsia Bank.

She saw the word in every article that mentioned her: *pioneer*. It sounded like a decoration, but it really meant: nobody like you had ever stood in this place before.

And sometimes she wondered whether that was something to be proud of, or something to be quietly afraid of.

*

She had reached her position over twenty-three years.

Through two miscarriages, both during critical projects, about which she told no one in the office.

Through three changes of boss.

Through Andrzej Wiśniewski.

Andrzej Wiśniewski, chairman for four years, was elegant, married, the father of three daughters, a regular churchgoer, and the kind of man who addressed female colleagues as “madam.”

And for four years he systematically undermined every one of Katarzyna’s decisions in public, always in a way that could be framed as “a technical discussion”.

“Katarzyna, I understand your enthusiasm, but...”

“That’s an interesting approach, though perhaps a touch excessive...”

“We should check whether our colleague on the board needs some support here.”

‘Our colleague on the board’ – forty-eight years old. Twenty-three years of experience. Forty million PLN in assets under management. And still only “our colleague”.

*

In the lift on a Wednesday morning, just before her presentation to the supervisory board, Andrzej Wiśniewski said calmly: “Katarzyna, I can see you have ambitions.”

A pause.

“But I wonder whether you realise there is a certain line beyond which a woman’s ambition starts to... get in the way. In relationships. In the atmosphere.”

He smiled gently.

“I’m just saying it to help you grow.”

The lift doors opened. Katarzyna stepped out and replied without turning around:

“Thank you for the advice.”

Three hours later she delivered her presentation. It was flawless.

*

The Polish corporate world of the 1990s and early 2000s, where Katarzyna began her career, had a very particular character. It had grown out of a system in which business belonged almost exclusively to men shaped by Party or military hierarchies. Women entered that world as exceptions that required constant justification.

Katarzyna justified her presence for twenty-three years. Then Andrzej Wiśniewski left for a promotion in Brussels – the purest irony the system could offer – and Katarzyna became Managing Director. The first woman to hold the position at the Polish branch of EurAsia Bank. Only then did she discover how cold and lonely it was at the top.

*

The men on the board had their own networks – golf, long dinners, those informal evenings fuelled with alcohol where the real decisions were made.

Katarzyna was invited. She always went. But she remained a guest. The one who had been invited, never the one who truly belonged.

One evening Maya asked her directly: “What’s the hardest part?”

Katarzyna surprised herself with her answer.

“The loneliness,” she said quietly. “At this level you’re alone in a way that can’t be written into any annual review. The men have each other. I have results.”

*

Katarzyna's management style had been a topic of quiet discussion in HR for years: "*micromanaging*," "*difficult*," "*controlling*."

She controlled because she had learned the hard way that if she didn't, the fruits of her work quietly migrated under someone else's name. That if she delegated, she needed ironclad evidence that the final decision had been hers.

When Maya said this to her directly, Katarzyna was silent for a long while.

"I know," she finally replied. "But I don't know how to change it without losing control over what is mine."

Maya spoke gently.

"Maybe start with one person. One project. Without checking everything."

Katarzyna looked out of the window at the grey ribbon of the Vistula.

"One," she said at last.

*

On weekends she kayaked on the Masurian lakes. In the middle of Lake Śniardwy, surrounded by silence and water, she would sometimes stop paddling and realise, for a few brief minutes, that she didn't know who she was – apart from being labelled 'pioneer.'

And that "didn't know" tasted like a breath.

*

When Claire Beaumont arrived at the Polish branch – French, from investment banking, on a one-year secondment – Katarzyna regarded her with cautious respect. Claire was good. Very good. Sharp, fast, and possessed of that distinctly French ability to make a business argument sound like philosophy, while backing it with rigorous analysis.

The problem surfaced during their first joint project.

Katarzyna ran the project with her usual methodical precision: weekly status meetings, every agenda item assigned to a named owner with a clear deadline, reports due by four o'clock on Fridays.

Claire did the work excellently – but she would arrive at meetings with new ideas and spontaneous suggestions for changing the plan, which were never on the agenda, and present them with energetic, direct enthusiasm.

At the third meeting, Katarzyna said directly: “Claire, if you have proposals for changes to the plan, I’d appreciate it if you could send them by email in advance so that I can add them to the agenda.”

Claire replied, “But these are spontaneous observations. I don’t always know them in advance.”

“I understand. Still, I’d like the meetings to follow a clear structure.”

“Of course,” Claire said.

And that, Katarzyna thought, was the end of it.

*

A week later, Claire said to Maya over coffee: “Katarzyna is good, but quite rigid. As if every spontaneous thought were a threat to the project.”

Maya chose her words carefully.

“I think it may be less about character and more about management style.”

“What do you mean?”

Maya paused for a moment.

“In Polish working culture – especially at senior levels – there is a strong emphasis on structure and planning. Changing the plan mid-meeting can be interpreted not as initiative, but as a lack of discipline or as undermining the person leading the project.”

Claire raised her eyebrows.

“Really? In France, a spontaneous proposal during a meeting is seen as a contribution. It shows you’re engaged and thinking.”

“Here it also shows you’re thinking,” Maya replied. “The question is *when* and *how* you show it.”

*

Maya mentioned the conversation to Katarzyna – carefully, discreetly.

“Claire asked me about your management style. I wonder whether the two of you have ever talked about how each of you prefers to work.”

Katarzyna was quiet for a moment.

“We haven’t,” she admitted. “I assumed the initial meeting would be enough.”

“It might be worth having that conversation directly,” Maya suggested. “Not about the conflict – about styles.”

Katarzyna invited Claire for a coffee the following week.

“I’ve heard you have a different way of working from what I’m used to with my team,” she said. “I’d like to understand it better.”

Claire looked surprised – and visibly pleased.

For nearly an hour they talked openly. Katarzyna explained that in Poland, especially at senior levels, a meeting is expected to follow a clear structure and that spontaneous changes can be read as a lack of preparation or disrespect for the leader. Claire described how in France a meeting is often a space for the live exchange of ideas, and silence is frequently interpreted as disinterest rather than reflection.

At the end, Katarzyna said with a small smile: “So for the past month we’ve each been thinking the other was difficult.”

“Exactly,” Claire replied, laughing.

“Which means,” Katarzyna added, “we were being difficult to each other, for the same reason: nobody told us we were speaking different languages.”

Claire nodded.

“That’s how it is with cultures. Everyone assumes English is enough. But English is only the words. Underneath is everything else.”

A Night in Three Time Zones

At Wednesday night, in three cities, in three different time zones, three women are still awake.

*

In Warsaw it is 1.34 a.m.

Maya checks her emails for the fifth time. She knows there is nothing new. Still, she checks.

Zofia lies motionless, staring at the ceiling, replaying a meeting from a week ago.

Katarzyna rehearses in her head the presentation her team leader will give tomorrow.

Agnieszka sits at her desk and writes in her notebook:

"Is my notebook my defence, or my prison?"

*

In Singapore, at the same moment, it is 7.34 a.m.

Priscilla is checking a report for the fourth time. There are no errors. She checks it for the fifth time.

Siti lies awake beside a sleeping Farhan, replaying in her mind the things she didn't say at today's meeting.

Meilin is analysing last week's presentation, carefully cataloguing every mistake.

*

In Hanoi, at the same moment, it is 6.34 a.m.

Linh is replying to a client's email. At this hour, because she thought the client would be pleased.

Thanh is trying not to think. She thinks anyway. She analyses her own thinking. She analyses the fact that she is analysing.

*

None of them knows that at this same moment the others are also awake. None of them knows that in a few weeks they will all sit in the same meeting. None of them knows that they will begin to speak. And – for the first time – truly listen.

*

Tonight, each one of them is alone with her own voice. It speaks calmly, reasonably, in the tone of someone who only wants what is best for her:

You are not good enough.

Don't rest.

Work.

Check.

Correct.

Be better. Be faster. Be calmer.

And never, ever emotional.

It whispers: *just one more email.*

One more check.

One more revision before you send it.

One more night before you allow yourself to rest.

It says: *others are managing. Why can't you?*

It says: *this isn't the right moment. Wait.*

Finish the project first.

Get the promotion first.

Prove that you are enough – and only then can you start living.

And so you wait.

You finish the project.

You get the promotion.

You start a new project.

And the voice whispers:

Not yet.

A little longer.

A little more.

This voice has no face.

You cannot report it to HR.

It leaves no visible trace.

It lives where you live – in the same head, the same body,
beside the same cold tea at midnight.

This voice has many names. In life, too often, we call it *ourselves*.

Yêu nhau yêu cả đường đi.

*(When you love someone, you love even the road they
walk.) The same goes for yourself.*

— Vietnamese proverb, with a line added by the author

Chapter 8

Thanh – Data Instead of Feelings

Thanh had always told her colleagues that she didn't cry. For seven years of school, four years of university, and two years at work, she had never cried in any public place.

She cried only once – in a hotel bathroom in Bangkok, during a leadership training for young talents from across the region.

The facilitator had asked: "Think of a moment when you truly felt seen."

Thanh searched her memory for five long minutes. She could not find a single moment at work. The only moment that came to her was from her tenth year. She had drawn a river, and her mother had looked at it and said softly, "This is exactly how I see the river inside my heart."

When Thanh returned to the training room, her eyes were red.

"Allergies," she said.

*

In Bangkok, during that same leadership training, Thanh sat next to Meilin Chen from Singapore. Both spoke little and precisely – a quiet kinship they both immediately recognised.

"I don't like these 'talk about your feelings' exercises," Meilin said softly.

"Neither do I," Thanh replied. "But I suspect we have the same reason."

“What reason?”

“That feelings cost us more than they cost others.”

Meilin was silent for a moment, then gave a small nod.

“Yes,” she said. “There’s something in that.”

And that was enough. That small exchange was enough for them to become friends – the kind of friendship that doesn’t need many words.

*

The Vietnamese attitude to emotions at work was full of contradictions. On one side stood Confucian restraint: emotions were private, hierarchy was public. On the other side lived Vietnamese warmth: a deep sense of collectivism, a genuine concern for group harmony, and the natural habit of meeting after work to talk for hours about things far removed from projects and deadlines.

Thanh had observed that contradiction for years. In the office, everyone was professional and composed. Outside the office, they became warm, open, and personal.

She chose professionalism. Around the clock. And she paid for it with an isolation she didn’t know how to name.

*

Her manager, Nguyễn Thị Hoa – a woman in her fifties with thirty years in the industry – had been giving Thanh the same kind of feedback for two years:

“You are too technical,” she said in March.

“You are too assertive,” she said in June, after Thanh had done exactly what she had been asked to do.

Thanh wrote both comments down. Between them lay four months of careful adjustment.

She told Linh about it over coffee one afternoon.

“Hoa went through a system that broke her,” Linh said. “Now she passes on survival tools, not life tools.”

She took a slow sip of her coffee.

“This isn’t malice. It’s something worse – it’s sincerity.”

Thanh was quiet for a moment.

“What do I do with that sincerity?”

“You listen,” Linh replied. “And you learn to separate what is useful information from what is simply her pain.”

*

Minh Đức Trung – a senior manager – liked Thanh and respected her competence. But in every meeting with foreign clients, he naturally addressed the men, even when Thanh was the clearest expert in the room. When she finally asked him about it, he gave a calm, matter-of-fact answer: “It’s cultural. Our Asian partners prefer to speak to men at a strategic level.”

“But by adjusting to that reality, we help perpetuate it,” Thanh replied.

“You’re right,” he said. “But in the short term, we have to think about results.”

Thanh returned to her desk and sat for a long hour with the question:

How do you change a system from within, when every action that could change the system is justified by the need to deliver results inside that very system?

She found no answer. She wrote the question down.

*

When Maya arrived in Hanoi, Thanh watched her quietly for two weeks. Maya did something Thanh had never learned how to do: she walked into meetings and spoke first. Simply. Directly. Without waiting for permission or checking if it was her turn.

One afternoon, over tea, Thanh finally asked: “How do you do it?”

Maya smiled slightly.

“I had a long training. And I realised that waiting for permission almost always ends the same way – you never get it. So you have to give it to yourself.”

Thanh was quiet for a moment.

“And that’s the hardest part?”

Maya nodded.

“The hardest.”

*

In the small garden behind the office, between meetings, Thanh said quietly: “I don’t know what I feel most of the time. I know what I think. But what I feel... that’s encrypted.”

Maya looked at her gently.

“When did you start encrypting?”

“When I realised emotions were treated as interference. So I encrypted them. So they wouldn’t interfere with being taken seriously.”

Maya nodded slowly.

“And what are those emotions trying to tell you now?”

Thanh sat with the question for a long time.

“That I’m tired,” she said at last. “Tired of constantly proving that I’m rational enough to deserve to be taken seriously.”

Maya didn’t try to fix it. She didn’t offer advice. She simply nodded.

And in that moment, Thanh felt something she rarely felt at work: she was seen.

Not for what she produced or how clearly she reasoned or how little space her emotions took up. Seen fully – as a person who was tired, who had been encrypting herself for years, and who was only now, in a small garden between meetings, beginning to wonder what it might cost her to stop.

*

At the Bangkok training, Thanh sat in a group with people from seven countries.

The Australian facilitator – energetic, loud, and informal – asked at one point: “Okay, who wants to share their example?”

Silence.

He waited five seconds, then said, “No one? Alright, I’ll pick.” He pointed straight at Thanh. “What do you say?”

Thanh had a good example ready. She knew exactly what she wanted to say. But during those five seconds of silence, she had not raised her hand. In the culture she grew up in, volunteering first was considered a form of pride. You didn’t speak until you were clearly invited.

She answered the question well. The facilitator said, “Great.”

But later, during a break, Kurt – the German colleague, who had been sitting next to her – commented: “You had such a strange look on your face during those five seconds. As if you didn’t know the answer.”

“I knew the answer,” Thanh replied. “I was waiting for someone to be asked.”

Kurt looked genuinely puzzled.

“Why wait? If you have the answer, you speak.”

Thanh thought for a moment how to explain.

“Where I come from, in Vietnam, speaking first is like taking more than your share. It’s better to wait until you are invited.”

Kurt shook his head.

“But here, if you don’t speak, people assume you don’t know.”

Thanh sat with that for the rest of the training. Two different systems. In one, speaking first is read as pride. In the other, not speaking is read as ignorance. Neither system was wrong. But she had to play on both boards at once.

*

That evening, over dinner in the hotel, Thanh told Meilin about her conversation with Kurt.

Meilin listened quietly, then nodded.

“It’s the same for me,” she said. “In Singapore, the Chinese part of me says: don’t stand out. The Western part of the office says: stand out, or you don’t exist. I’m constantly balancing between the two.”

“And what did you choose?” Thanh asked.

“It depends on the room. I would look around, read the people, and pick the version of myself that fit best. But it’s exhausting.”

Thanh looked at her, confused.

“So you have to be like two different people.”

“Three, actually,” Meilin replied with a small, tired smile. “Chinese-Singaporean at home. Western with the expats in the office. And the one in the middle when I’m with the local Singaporean team – which is also a complicated mix.”

Thanh looked at her.

“And nobody on the outside sees any of this.”

“No,” Meilin said. “They only see that we are ‘flexible’. They think it’s a talent. They don’t realise it’s daily labour that never appears in any job description.”

"The demands we make of ourselves tell us a great deal about what we did not get, but needed."

Chapter 9

Meilin – The Internal Tribunal

Meilin Chen judged everyone. Including herself. When a colleague made a mistake in a valuation model, Meilin's verdict was instant: *careless, incompetent*. When she made the same mistake herself, she spent three full nights conducting an internal tribunal over her "*fundamental lack of concentration*." One error, one quick judgement of others. Three days of self-interrogation for her.

*

Meilin Chen grew up in Bishan, in a family with deep roots in Fujian – the same province as Priscilla's family, though they didn't discover this until months into their acquaintance. When they finally did, over coffee, both women fell silent for a moment. They recognised something deeper: both were daughters of the same unforgiving philosophy – that mistakes were a luxury they could not afford.

"Did your father also tell you that you had to be twice as good?" Priscilla asked.

Meilin gave a small, knowing smile.

"Mine said three times as good," she replied. "So that we could be equal."

*

In Bangkok, at the leadership training, Meilin sat next to Thanh from Hanoi. Both spoke little and precisely. Both said they disliked exercises where you had to “talk about your feelings.” Both understood – without needing to explain – that they had the same reason. The conversation lasted five minutes. The friendship lasted years.

*

James Chua, her boss for three years, had a habit of commenting on the appearance of women on his team in ways that always stayed just within the boundary of a “compliment.”

“Meilin, you’re looking particularly smart today,” he said after she had openly disagreed with his analysis.

“Nice blouse, Meilin. Femininity like that is a rarity in treasury,” he remarked after she received a better bonus than expected.

“When you look like that, the London partners will be much more inclined to listen,” he told her before an important presentation.

Each comment, taken alone, was defensible. Taken together, they formed a clear pattern.

For a year, Meilin kept careful documentation – dates, context, exact words.

Then she consulted a lawyer and filed a formal complaint with HR.

*

What followed was what Meilin would later describe as “procedural hell”.

An investigation was launched.

James Chua declared himself “shocked.”

Two witnesses suddenly “couldn’t remember.”

The official finding: “insufficient evidence.”

Meilin was given a new line manager. It was presented to the team as a “structural reorganisation.”

For a year she believed she had made a terrible mistake by filing the complaint. No one said it outright, but she could read the silence clearly: *She’s the one who stirred things up.*

Two years later, James Chua left the bank “by mutual agreement.”

A colleague from HR quietly whispered to her: “Your complaint was the first of three.”

The first of three. Someone had come after her.

*

The treasury department in Singapore was global in theory and distinctly hierarchical in practice. On paper, it was a diverse, English-speaking environment with staff from fifteen countries. Diversity was said to drive innovation. In reality, it was managed by a dominant organisational culture – a British-London core with a local Singaporean flourish.

Hierarchy was verbally flat, everyone used first names, but structurally steep. Those who came from cultures where context mattered as much as content (Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Indian) were expected to adapt to the “Western style.” The Western style was never asked to adapt to anything.

Meilin learned the style well.

What no diversity training ever mentioned was the double standard that operated above culture: when a woman communicated in this direct, confident, space-taking Western style, she was labelled “*aggressive*”. When a man did exactly the same, he was called a “*leader*”.

The rule was systemic – built not into any policy or handbook, but into the quiet consensus of who got to be taken seriously and on what terms. Meilin had adapted her voice, her cadence, her way of entering a room. She had done everything that was asked. And still, the standard moved. It always moved just far enough to remain out of reach.

*

Priscilla introduced them with a single sentence: “You have to meet her. She’s like you, only less wound up.”

At their first meeting, Meilin immediately pointed out three places where Maya’s method was less effective.

Maya listened carefully, then said: “You’re right on two of them. On the third, my approach actually works better in unstable conditions. I’ll show you tomorrow.”

Meilin was caught off guard. Most people either defended themselves fiercely or immediately backed down. Instead, Maya simply offered to demonstrate.

“Tomorrow,” Meilin agreed. And that was the beginning.

*

At one of their Friday meetings, when Maya was in Singapore, Meilin said: “I have a list of mistakes I’m not allowed to make. I check it every morning.”

Priscilla looked at her.

“And when do you shorten the list?”

“I don’t,” Meilin replied. “I only add to it.”

Priscilla paused, then asked gently: “When was the last time you forgave yourself?”

Meilin blinked.

“What does it mean... to forgive yourself?”

Priscilla gave a small, sad smile. “So – never.”

Meilin didn’t deny it. But for several days afterwards, the question kept returning to her like a pebble in her shoe.

*

When James Chua, her boss at the time, once told her, “Meilin, you need to be more frank,” she both understood and didn’t understand what he meant.

She knew the English meaning: *frank* meant direct, open, speaking plainly, candid. What she didn't know was how to do it without losing something essential in the process. Because in the Chinese-Singaporean family she grew up in, directness was a form of disrespect – especially toward elders, superiors, or anyone of higher status. To speak directly was to imply: *your view doesn't matter, mine does more*. Even when the other view truly didn't matter.

This was something else entirely – a system of meaning with its own internal order, its own rules for preserving harmony and face. A culture operating by a logic as coherent and complete as any other, just built around different values, different silences, different ways of holding the world together.

*

One day in a team meeting, James asked for opinions on a new valuation model he had proposed himself. Meilin saw three errors in it – errors that would affect the quarterly results.

She said carefully: “The model is interesting. I can see a few issues that it might be worth analysing before implementation.”

James raised an eyebrow.

“What issues?”

Meilin listed them precisely but wrapped every point in softeners – “it might be worth,” “perhaps,” “this may be a question of the input data.”

After the meeting, James pulled her aside.

“Meilin, I can see you have concerns, but you need to say them clearly. Not ‘it might be worth’ – say ‘there’s an error here’.”

Meilin nodded.

“OK. Understood.”

That evening at home, she sat with the contradiction.

James wanted her to say, plainly and directly:

There’s an error here.

But in the cultural system she grew up in, telling your boss that his own model contains errors – especially in front of the team – was a form of publicly questioning his authority. Even if James didn’t feel questioned, she would feel that she had questioned him.

And that feeling, invisible to him, was completely real to her.

*

She wrote to Priscilla: “James says I have to be more frank. But for me, frank sounds like rude.”

Priscilla replied almost immediately: “I have the same problem. Expats from Europe see indirectness as a lack of confidence. For me, indirectness is a form of respect.”

“How do you resolve it?”

“I learned to separate the two: when I’m indirect out of respect, and when I’m indirect out of fear. Respect is fine. Fear isn’t.”

Meilin sat with that distinction for several days.

At the next meeting, when James asked for feedback on a new model, Meilin said: “James, I see three areas that require correction before implementation. I can go through them now or send a detailed note.”

James nodded.

“Go through them now.”

And Meilin did. Precisely. Without “it might be worth” or “perhaps”. She said, “There is a methodological error here,” and explained each point clearly.

James listened, then said, “Thank you. That’s helpful.”

Meilin left the meeting and stood for a moment in the corridor. She felt something strange and unfamiliar: she had spoken directly, it had been the right thing to do, and no one had been offended. It was simply a pure exchange of information.

It was merely a one-time exercise, not yet a habit, but she loved the rising feeling of keeping control and leading – as though it marked a new and powerful beginning.

*"Your voice is sufficient.
The problem isn't that you speak too quietly.
The problem is that you have been taught to check
whether you are allowed to speak."*

Chapter 10

Weronika – Two Voices

Weronika Szymańska joined the bank with a distinction from SGH and a bright dream of “changing finance from within”. Three years later, the only thing she had actually changed was the colour of her nail polish – from bold red to a safe, neutral beige. In her first week, someone more senior had commented that red was “too loud for a banking environment”. She changed the polish.

Small compromises, she was discovering, have a tendency not to stop at nail polish.

*

Her direct manager was Agnieszka Wróbel – a woman carrying her own heavy baggage, who did what she could and did it with honesty. Higher up the hierarchy stood Malwina Czajka. Malwina didn’t like Weronika, and it wasn’t personal.

“Weronika, in this firm you need to learn patience.”

“How long does it take to build trust?” Weronika asked.

“It depends how you build it,” Malwina replied.

An answer that answered nothing.

*

The mechanism was precise: a double standard of appraisal. Maciej – one year more senior, with similar results – was described as “a developing leader with strong potential”. Weronika was described as “promising, but needing more maturity”.

Maciej interrupted in meetings. No one commented. Weronika interrupted once, and after the meeting, Malwina said to her: “It’s important to listen until the end.”

Weronika carried this for months. She didn’t know whether it was discrimination or whether Malwina simply didn’t like her. In the end, the distinction didn’t really matter. What mattered was the result: she was judged more harshly and valued less often.

*

She tried a direct conversation with Malwina.

“I have the impression that my mistakes are judged differently from similar mistakes made by my male colleagues.”

Malwina leaned back slightly and raised her eyebrows.

“I understand you may perceive it that way. But I get the impression that you tend to look for external causes for your difficulties instead of focusing on yourself.”

“Can you give me specific areas I should work on?”

“Professional maturity. Patience. The ability to accept feedback without becoming defensive.”

Weronika sat with the words for a moment.

She had asked about defensiveness – and received defensiveness in return. She had asked for specifics – and received abstractions. This was *institutional gaslighting* at its finest: the person who raised the problem became the problem.

*

Weronika had been writing a blog for a year and a half – *WW Finance* – under a pseudonym. It had twelve thousand followers. She wrote about markets, about saving, and about thinking about money without fear. And she wrote in a voice noticeably more confident than the one she used in meetings. Anonymity gave her a space where Malwina could not reach her.

*

Weronika's generation – millennials who entered the job market in the age of social media and endless "be yourself" slogans – faced a particular dilemma: everything outside the office encouraged authenticity, while everything inside it imposed strict limits.

She talked about this with Maya one evening.

"On the blog I'm myself – confident, direct, with clear opinions. At the office, I wait until someone more senior says what I've been thinking for a week, and then I agree with them."

"Why is that?" Maya asked.

"Because at the office, being yourself costs. On the blog it also costs, but differently."

“What would happen if you brought that voice into the office?”

Weronika gave a small, bitter smile.

“Malwina would say I was immature.”

*

After the conversation with Maya, Weronika published one post under her real name. A short one. About corporate invisibility. About how the “little things” carry real weight. It received seven hundred comments. Half of them began with the same two words: *Me too*.

She read every single one. At one in the morning, sitting in front of her laptop, she felt something it took her a moment to name. Pure relief – a quiet, profound relief that comes when something you have carried alone for years is finally seen and named by others. When you realise you are not the only one who knows it exists.

*

For three years at the bank, Weronika had carried the quiet conviction that she was too sensitive, too impatient, too ambitious in the wrong way. That others were coping somehow, and she simply didn’t understand the rules. That maybe Malwina was right and it really was about maturity. Seven hundred people wrote: me too.

Seven hundred people told her in the middle of the night what no one had told her in three years during the day: that this wasn’t her personal failing.

That it was a much larger problem. And that she – Weronika Szymańska, with her blog and her voice and her first post under her real name – had just touched something true.

*

Weronika often thought about how the cultural differences discussed in training were always presented geographically – Poland versus Singapore, East versus West, Asia versus Europe – yet inside the bank there was another divide that no one ever mentioned: generations.

Malwina Czajka was forty-eight. She had begun her career in a world where promotion came through loyalty, patience, and invisibility. When assertiveness was considered a sin. When a woman who openly asked about promotion was labelled “too ambitious”.

Weronika was twenty-six. She had grown up surrounded by slogans: “Find your passion,” “Authenticity is strength,” “Your voice matters.” She had absorbed Instagram coaches, TED Talks, and podcasts on productivity and women’s leadership.

Two women. The same language. Completely different dictionaries.

*

One day, Weronika went to Malwina with a fully prepared proposal for a new project – two pages of description, a clear rationale, and a risk assessment.

Malwina read it carefully, then said: “That’s interesting. But before you present it higher up, it’s worth letting it mature a bit.”

Weronika felt the familiar twist in her stomach. “What do you mean by that?”

Malwina smiled faintly.

“Just give it time.”

Weronika returned to her desk and wrote to Maya: “Malwina says my project needs to ‘mature’. What does that even mean?”

Maya replied quickly: “When my ideas had to ‘mature’, it usually meant one of three things: not now, not you, or wait until someone more senior claims it as their own.”

“How do I tell the difference between legitimate feedback and stalling?”

“Ask for specifics. Instead of saying ‘What do you mean by that?’, say: ‘Which elements of the proposal need further development, and by when?’”

*

The next day, Weronika went back to Malwina.

“Malwina, I’d like to understand the feedback better. Which specific elements of the project need further development, and by when?”

Malwina looked at her for a moment, as if recalibrating.

“The budget section is too general,” she said. “And I’d like to see a comparative analysis with similar projects from last year.”

It was concrete, and Weronika could finally work with it.

“I can have it ready by Friday.”

“Good,” Malwina replied.

Weronika left the office with something shifting deep inside her. That was genuine feedback – not stalling or dismissal disguised as wisdom – but to receive it, she had to ask differently. She realised that the generational gap between her and Malwina was like a cultural one: they spoke the same language, worked in the same bank, yet the word “mature” meant something entirely different to each of them. And no one had ever told them their dictionaries didn’t match.

*"You cannot be both free and cautious at the same
time."*

Chapter 11

Amara – The Only One in the Room

Amara Diallo saw everything. The moment she entered a meeting, she absorbed the invisible architecture of the room: who positioned themselves near power, who kept distance, whose eyes refused to meet hers. Years of being the only Black woman at the table had honed this ability to anticipate the currents before they became visible. It was a gift, yet at the same time a burden she carried in silence.

*

Her father was a water engineer in Dakar – a man who built wells in places where water did not exist. Her mother taught biology and moved effortlessly between French, Pulaar and Wolof. Amara grew up believing the world was something to be built. That barriers were logistical problems, not structural ones.

Paris taught her that doors opened more easily for some than for others.

London taught her that “some” was a very precise category.

Singapore taught her that even in a global city, you could be global and still remain “the one from outside.”

*

Once a year, Amara flew home to Dakar. Always on a night flight from Singapore via Dubai – twelve hours, two connections, and that quiet, suspended moment when the plane began its descent over the Atlantic and Dakar appeared below: white buildings against red earth, the ocean so impossibly blue it looked almost unreal.

The moment the wheels touched the runway, she switched off “task mode.” It happened automatically, without effort.

For one week she belonged only to her family. She ate *thieboudienne* cooked by her mother, played draughts with her brothers on the veranda, and walked the beach at dawn to watch the fishermen pull in their nets. No one asked what firm she worked for. No one expected her to be impressive.

Then she would return. Task mode switched itself back on the moment she stepped into Changi Airport – before she had even cleared immigration.

*

“Task mode” was the state in which she switched off any feeling about her own situation and focused exclusively on delivery. It did not ask how she felt – it asked only what needed to be done.

She was the only Black woman serving as Global Head of Product across the entire EurAsia Bank group, and that mode allowed her to succeed.

*

At a regional conference in Bangkok, she looked around the room and counted: one. Out of forty-three directors, she was the only Black woman.

She closed her notebook, switched into task mode, and started her presentation.

Amara presented on climate risks for Asian portfolios – twenty minutes, precise, built on her own models and data from three continents.

During the Q&A, a senior director from New York raised his hand.

“Who prepared this analysis?”

“I did,” Amara replied.

The man smiled politely.

“Yes, of course. But I mean – which analytics organisation actually built the models?”

Two seconds of silence.

“I did,” she said again, keeping her voice steady and her smile in place. “The models are mine. The methodology is mine.”

The director nodded with a vague “of course” and moved on to his next question.

*

Amara returned to her hotel, sat on the edge of the bed, and stayed there for a long time. She was sad and disappointed. She thought about the six weeks of preparation. About being recognised as an expert.

About how none of that had protected her from a single moment in which someone looked at her and saw an assistant, and not the author.

Paris had taught her that racism could be unintentional. London had taught her that intention didn't lessen the impact. Singapore had taught her that a company's "global" label was not the same as equality. In the multicultural organisations Amara knew – and she knew many – diversity was often performed. Bodies from different cultures were welcomed, but different ways of thinking, different values, and different visions of leadership rarely were.

Diversity without inclusion is decoration," she had once said during a board training. The room had fallen quiet for only a moment.

*

Maya met Amara at a global risk conference in Singapore. After the presentation, she asked: "What drives you in this personally?"

"It's the work," Amara answered. "It's my job."

"I know. But I can see there's something more."

Amara hesitated for a moment, then said quietly: "Senegal is drowning. Literally. My home region floods more each year. And I stand here making presentations for a London board that asks about the ROI on sustainability."

Maya listened.

"I feel like I'm in the most influential place I could possibly be," Amara continued, "and that it's still changing nothing."

“Maybe it’s changing something,” Maya replied. “Just slowly. In ways you won’t see right away.”

Amara carried those words with her as something to hold onto.

*

Amara rarely spoke about one part of her life: her daughter Isabela, four years old, living in Paris with her ex-husband Philippe.

Isabela always drew her mother with a suitcase, because that was how she knew her – always arriving, always leaving.

One evening, during a FaceTime call, Isabela asked: “Mummy, why are you always flying?”

Amara paused, searching for an answer a four-year-old could understand. The question landed harder than she expected, and for a moment she was grateful the screen only showed her from the shoulders up, so Isabela couldn't see her hands tighten around her phone.

“Because I’m building something,” she said finally.

“What are you building?”

“Something so that one day you won’t have to fly like this.”

Isabela thought for a moment, then nodded.

“OK. But come back for Saturday.”

“I’ll come back for Saturday.”

And she always did.

*

At one of the global conferences, Amara ran a workshop on climate risk with participants from twelve countries. Her style – analytical, direct, data-driven, with black humour as a buffer – usually worked well in Singapore and London. This time, there was also a delegation from Ghana and Senegal. After one of her presentations, Moses, a quiet, experienced participant from Accra in his forties, raised his hand.

“Ms Diallo, this is a very strong analysis, but I wonder whether, in the context of African markets, what’s missing is the voice of local communities.”

Amara replied: “The data includes local indicators from seven African countries.”

Moses nodded respectfully.

“Data, yes. But voice – not necessarily.”

Amara paused.

In her professional world, data was *voice*. Data made suffering measurable. Data translated human reality into something a London board could not dismiss.

Moses was pointing at something else: that data about communities was not the same as the voice of communities.

*

That evening, Amara sat alone in her hotel room and thought about Moses's words for a long time. He was right. Her approach – measure, quantify, translate everything into return on investment – was a survival strategy she had perfected inside a Western corporation. She had learned to speak a language the board could hear. But something important was being lost in translation.

She wrote to Maya: "Someone told me today that my data has no voice. And he was right."

Maya replied quickly: "How so?"

"I was collecting data about African communities. I translated it into something the London board could understand. But I never asked those communities how they wanted to be represented."

"That sounds like something that applies to all of us. We learn to speak the language of the system. And we lose pieces of ourselves along the way."

"The real question is whether what we lose can ever be recovered."

"I think it can. But first you have to admit that it was lost."

Amara put down her phone and looked out of the window at another city, another time zone, another context. Moses had spoken calmly, in English, without anger. He had simply named what was missing. And she had heard him well because he had understood both languages: the language of data and the language of the human voice. He knew exactly what got lost in translation.

*"A woman who finds her way back — to herself, to her
work, to her dreams — is the bravest person in the
room."*

Chapter 12

Roksana – The Return

Roksana Mazur returned to work after maternity leave on a Monday at eight in the morning. There were milk stains on the shirt beneath her blazer and thirty-six hours of unbroken sleep missing from her body. She wore a smile anyway.

Nobody in the office asked how she was. They asked when she was going to finish the report that had been “waiting a bit”.

*

Filip was four months old and had colic. Roksana was thirty-two and had the strange feeling that she had returned to a place she could no longer remember leaving.

Her project was now being run by Michal. Client B – the relationship she had spent a year carefully building – had been handed over to Marta.

“These relationships are already settled,” Grzegorz, her manager, told her politely during their first catch-up. “Give us a bit of time.”

*

“A bit of time” lasted six months. For half a year Roksana worked on tasks two levels below her grade – and she did them well, because she didn’t know how to work any other way.

She worked more than before maternity leave: more tired, with fewer resources, and with every lateness (because Filip had a fever, because the nursery had called) became invisible proof that *“perhaps she isn’t ready after all”*.

*

Roksana watched how the system around motherhood worked in a Polish corporation – and how sharply it differed from the ones her colleagues abroad described.

In Poland, maternity leave was legally long and universal. The return from it was not. There was an unwritten rule: you were here, you came back, now start from zero. Your projects had new owners. Your position remained the same only on paper. In reality you had to prove yourself again.

A colleague in London told her about structured return programmes and gradual reintegration.

A colleague in Singapore mentioned a formal mentor assigned for the first six months after coming back.

Roksana returned to her desk, where a report that had been “waiting a bit” still waited.

*

Three months after her return, Roksana started seeing a therapist. She had given herself a deadline: *if nothing improves by then, something...*

During one session the therapist said: “When someone ignores you while remaining perfectly polite, it is one of the hardest forms of violence to recognise. Because everything is officially ‘fine’. And yet you aren’t really there.”

Roksana remembered that sentence for a long time.

She was there. And she wasn’t.

*

She met Weronika through the blog. Weronika had written a raw post about returning from maternity leave. Someone sent Roksana the link. She left a comment. Weronika replied. Maya saw the exchange and invited Roksana to their next meeting.

“I didn’t know this was normal,” Roksana said quietly. “I thought it had only happened to me.”

“It happened to you,” Maya replied, “and to me, and to half the women in this room. And to half the women outside it.”

“Why does nobody talk about it?”

“They do,” Maya said. “Just separately. In private messages, in therapists’ offices, or in notebooks no one else ever reads.”

*

In the end, Roksana was given a project – small, but entirely her own, from beginning to end.

She ran it so well that Grzegorz wrote in her annual review: “Roksana has returned to full effectiveness.”

She read the sentence and immediately wrote to Maya: “Is it normal that a good review pisses me off?”

Maya replied within minutes: “A good review isn’t the same as respect.”

*

Few years ago, when Filip turned one and began to walk, Roksana recorded a video of his first shaky steps – the solemn concentration of a small human attempting something difficult.

That evening she watched it again and thought:

I want that too. To take steps that are mine. Shakily, if I have to.

At the school open day, when Filip was six, the teacher asked the children: “What does your mummy do?”

Filip thought for a moment, then said proudly: “Mummy analyses risk.”

“And what does that mean?”

“She checks that nothing bad happens.”

Roksana stood to one side, holding a paper cup of coffee, and felt something very simple: Pride. Pride in her work. Pride in her son who saw her. Pride in being there.

*

One day, gathering her courage, Roksana said to Grzegorz: “I’d like to talk about how we plan my return to my full remit.”

Grzegorz nodded politely.

“Of course. We’ll give you a bit of time.”

Roksana knew it wasn't an answer. But she still didn't know how to push for specifics without being labelled "difficult".

She learned from Maya what returning from maternity looked like in other countries.

"In Singapore," Maya told her, "there are formal returnship programmes. A mentor, a six-month plan, regular check-ins."

Roksana gave a bitter laugh.

"Here it is just 'we'll give you a bit of time.'"

Maya nodded.

"In Vietnam, Linh said, women pretend nothing has changed after maternity. Because admitting that motherhood has affected them is seen as weakness."

"It's the same here," Roksana said. "Only nobody says it out loud."

"And in Poland there's an extra layer," Maya added. "The Catholic-cultural one. You are either *Matka Polka* (the self-sacrificing mother who puts family above everything) or a bad mother who abandons her child for work. There's almost no space for the idea that you can be both a mother and a professional, and that both identities are equally true."

Roksana was quiet for a long moment.

"So I'm not only fighting Grzegorz," she said finally. "I'm fighting the whole narrative that says it has to be either-or."

"Yes," Maya replied. "And that narrative lives in the culture, not just in the office."

Roksana began talking to other women who had returned from maternity leave – some in her own firm, others in an online group she had found through Weronika’s blog. Women from Poland, Germany, the United Kingdom, and one from Japan.

Yuki, the Japanese woman, wrote: “In Japan I went back after four months and for a year I told almost no one at work that I had a baby. As if he didn’t exist.”

Ingrid from Germany wrote: “I took a full year. My boss told me to take it easy. When I returned, the project I had been leading was already in someone else’s hands.”

Sarah from the UK wrote: “Before I went on leave, HR asked me if I wanted a return plan. We built it together, point by point.”

Roksana read their stories and realised: the same event – motherhood and return to work – looked completely different depending on the country. Because every country gave a different answer to one fundamental question: *is motherhood a professional problem or a private one?*

In Poland the answer was clear: private. Sort it out yourself.

In Germany and the UK it was increasingly seen as shared – the company had a role in the solution.

Roksana wrote to the group: “And how should it look?”

Sarah replied: “Like any other important project – with a plan, resources, and regular check-ins.”

Roksana copied the sentence. She pasted it into an email to Grzegorz and wrote: “I’d like to plan my return like a proper project: with a timetable, clear tasks, and regular status meetings. When can we discuss it?”

Grzegorz replied the same day: “Good idea. Let’s set it up for next week.”

It was her small step – chosen freely, taken without permission. And that made it matter more than anything anyone else had handed her.

A Catalogue of Strings

These truths settle deep into the small fractures of the workday – an offhand remark landing like a stone in still water, the predictable ripple of laughter that follows, the silence that says far more than any sentence could. They live in the tense space between what was said and what you were expected to understand, gradually shaping how you carry yourself, how you speak, and how vigilantly you shield your spirit. With time they compile into a hidden archive of moments witnessed only by you, quietly rewriting the rules of engagement in that room.

*

String One: *“It was only a joke.”*

Said at a team social by someone more senior. Everyone laughed. You laughed too. Because what else could you do? And for the next week you wondered if there was something wrong with you.

String Two: *“You need to be more confident.”*

It was the same measured tone. Same casual delivery. Same person. Only the verdict had flipped. First you were too quiet, too tentative, too invisible. So you gathered yourself, straightened your spine, and spoke up. You prepared. You contributed. You stopped softening every sentence. And just like that, the script changed. Now you were *“aggressive.”* Too sharp. Too much.

The speed of the reversal was dizzying. One week. That's all it took for confidence to become a flaw.

You replayed the conversations in your head, searching for the exact line you had crossed. But the line kept moving. It always moved. One day they wanted you bolder. The next day they punished you for it. The message was clear: there was no right way to be – only the way that kept you off-balance, always adjusting, always doubting.

String Three: *“Don’t take it personally.”*

When the project you had built for a year was quietly given to someone else. You went back to your desk and tried very hard not to take it personally. For a month you didn't know how to be yourself at work.

String Four: *“You’re too emotional.”*

Said the moment you named an injustice out loud. You were right. That was the problem.

By speaking up, you became the problem. Your anger was too loud, your tone too sharp, your truth too inconvenient. The real issue vanished behind the dismissal, leaving you to question how to be right without feeling wrong.

*

The Cultural String:

When your way of communicating – shaped by your culture, your family, your mother tongue – does not match the dominant pattern of the organisation. And instead of asking, “How can we better hear you?”, they ask, “Why don’t you speak the way we do?”

The Generational String:

When your questions are read as disrespect, your directness as immaturity, and your need for meaning as naivety.

The older voices dismissed your curiosity as insolence and your clarity as inexperience. What you saw as integrity they labelled as entitlement.

The gap wasn’t just age – it was power dressed up as wisdom. And every time you adapted, you lost another piece of yourself.

*

The strings do not appear in any management handbook. There is no official process for them. Yet they exist. And they work with devastating efficiency.

*

Puppets have their own legs.

Letters They Never Sent

Some things one writes only to throw them away. So that the words can leave the body.

*

A year after Trần Quốc Hùng had left the company, Linh wrote him a letter. In Vietnamese, on an ordinary sheet of paper. She described what had happened in the hotel lift. What it had done to her. How, for years afterwards, she had planned escape routes from every room she entered.

She folded the page carefully, carried it to the sink, and burnt it. She wasn't ashamed. She chose to let it go on her own terms.

*

Before Winston Chow retired, Priscilla wrote him a letter. Twelve paragraphs. Each one dated. Everything she had not said for two years. She saved it in an encrypted folder. She never sent it. And she decided that not sending it was both her choice and strength.

*

Siti wrote an anonymous email to HR describing a pattern of behaviour from Raymond Foo.

Three months later, Raymond Foo was moved to another department.

Maybe it was a coincidence or not, but in the quiet aftermath, Siti couldn't help but notice the subtle shift in office dynamics whenever his name came up.

*

Agnieszka wrote a letter to Tomek and sent it. A long one. A true one.

Tomek replied two days later: "I wish you all the best."

Agnieszka opened a new notebook and wrote the first sentence: *"I sent it!"*

*

Zofia doesn't write letters. In the top drawer of her desk lies a single folded note containing three sentences:

"I wasn't too loud.

I was loud enough.

They had a problem with the noise."

*

Amara doesn't write letters. She writes reports. But in an unnamed file on her laptop, saved at four in the morning, there is one sentence:

"I'm tired of proving that I have a right to be tired."

*

Maya added one more line to the file named “Personal – do not open”:

“I remember who I was before I learned to make myself smaller.”

She doesn’t know yet what she will do with these words. But she is writing them down.

*"The hardest string to cut is the one you can't feel —
the one that has grown into you."*

Chapter 13

Twelve

On a Wednesday afternoon, Maya sat at her desk with a cup of tea. For twenty minutes she stared at the empty screen. Then she wrote.

Subject: A question for a few people I respect

“I’m thinking about organising something informal – no corporate name, no budget, no agenda. Just a small group of women I’ve worked with or currently work with. A few hours to talk about one thing: what we really want from work. Not what is possible. Not what is reasonable. What we actually want.

If you’re open to it, write back.”

She added the names: Priscilla, Linh, Zofia, Agnieszka, Siti, Katarzyna, Thanh, Meilin, Amara, Weronika, Roksana. And sent it.

Eleven women. Plus Maya. Twelve.

*

The replies arrived over the next three days.

Priscilla – after two hours: “When and how.”

Linh – after two days: “Won’t it be too emotional?” And an hour later: “Never mind. I’m in.”

Zofia: “OK.”

Agnieszka: “Yes, but this isn’t another meeting where we ‘work on ourselves’. I’ve had enough of those.”

Siti: “Is it a safe space?” And a moment later: “Sorry, stupid question. I’m in.”

Katarzyna: “I have fifteen meetings that week. I can move one.”

Thanh: “What are the operational objectives of this meeting?” And a moment later: “Sorry. Yes. I’m in.”

Meilin: “I read your email three times and found no weakness. I’ll be there.”

Amara – after four days: “I don’t know why you sent it to me. Thank you. I’ll be there.”

Weronika – at night: “May I? Am I really on this list?”

Roksana: “Let me know the date – Filip will be at his grandmother’s.”

Maya read every reply twice. Twelve women. Twelve different ways of saying yes.

*

Sunday. 10 a.m. in Warsaw. 4 p.m. in Singapore. 3 p.m. in Hanoi. And somewhere over the Gulf, between Dubai and Singapore, Amara opened her laptop at altitude.

Twelve windows on Zoom. Twelve women. Twelve different rooms – and one seat by a small oval window.

Warsaw was waking up with morning light pouring through the windows. Singapore was burning through its afternoon sun. In Hanoi, Linh sat by her window with a cup of tea, watching the rooftops hold the last of the light.

Maya looked at all the faces and spoke simply: “I don’t have an agenda. I don’t have a PowerPoint. I have one question and three hours.”

A brief silence settled over the screens.

“When was the last time you did something at work simply because you wanted to – not because someone expected it, not because it was appropriate, not because it was strategic. Just because you wanted to. When?”

*

The silence stretched on. Priscilla stared at a point just beyond her screen. Zofia pressed her lips together tightly.

Agnieszka spoke first: “I don’t remember.”

And something shifted in the room – subtle, almost imperceptible, but undeniable.

*

The silence lasted a long time. Then the words began to come. Each hesitant word seemed to break the invisible wall they had all been hiding behind. Yet the weight of things left unsaid still felt even heavier, tying them together in uneasy silence.

Katarzyna spoke about the kayaks on Lake Śniardwy.

“In the middle of the lake, for a few minutes I didn’t know who I was apart from my title. And that ‘didn’t know’ tasted like a breath of freedom – like proof that I can be whoever I want to become. I want that water at work.”

Zofia said quietly: “My first boss spent a year teaching me that I took up too much space. And for a year I corrected myself. I thought I was making progress.”

Linh said the word “no” – softly, into the open space. It hung there, resonant.

Siti cried for a moment. She didn’t say “sorry”.

Thanh said: “I don’t know what I feel. But I feel something. And I have the sense that it matters.”

Meilin, after a very long pause, said simply: “So do I.”

Agnieszka spoke next: “I want to stop carrying this notebook. I want my thoughts not to have to be evidence.”

Amara said: “My country is drowning. And all I present are slides about sustainability.”

For a moment there was no analysis. Only that sentence.

Weronika, almost last as always, said: “I have a blog with twelve thousand readers. I wrote one post under my own name. Seven hundred people replied: *me too*.”

She paused.

“I want to keep writing. Under my own name. I want the voice I have there to be here, at work, too.”

Roksana was the last to speak.

“I came back from maternity leave and for a year I lived on a line: good mother because I work, or bad worker because I’m a mother. I just want to live. Without that line.”

*

At the end, Maya said softly: “I don’t have a plan. No follow-up sessions to check progress. No target defined. Just this – joint sharing.”

Priscilla looked at her screen for a moment, then replied: “That was one of the few moments when I didn’t check my watch.”

A dozen voices answered at once, almost in unison: “Me neither.”

*

That evening, Maya sat by the window. This time the tea was hot – she had remembered.

She thought: *nothing has changed. The banks are still the same. The hierarchies remain. The shadow factory continues its silent work.*

But for one Sunday, for three hours, each of them had spoken in her own voice. Not the voice that was appropriate. Not the voice that caused no trouble. And perhaps – Maya was only beginning to understand – that was the place where everything truly began.

*"What begins with one brave conversation never ends
in the same place."*

Epilogue: Six Months Later

January. In Singapore, it was twenty-eight degrees and bright sunshine. In Warsaw, minus thirteen with a week of unbroken snow. In Hanoi, sixteen degrees and thick fog since morning. In three cities and a dozen airports between them, twelve women carried on living.

*

Priscilla accepted the position of Regional Compliance Head in Kuala Lumpur. She took four spreadsheets and one notebook – the one reserved for things she could not control. Kuala Lumpur turned out to be a different city, a different hierarchy, and a different version of herself. In KL, Priscilla asked questions she had never asked in Singapore. She accepted an invitation to lunch with her team with no agenda attached.

She wrote to Maya: “I had lunch with people I don’t know, for no work reason. Nothing exploded.”

Maya replied: “That’s progress!”

*

Linh said “no” in a board meeting – to Director Minh, in public.

“I would rather present it myself, if you don’t mind – I have worked on it for three months.”

The silence lasted what felt like more than fifteen seconds.

Director Minh finally nodded.

“Of course.”

That evening she wrote to Maya: “I said no. For those fifteen seconds I thought everything would fall apart.”

Maya replied: “I know. That’s exactly why it’s courage.”

*

Zofia invited Jakub, a quiet analyst from her team, for coffee with no agenda.

“Do you enjoy this job?” she asked.

Jakub looked surprised, then answered carefully, “Yes. But it’s a bit hard sometimes.”

And then he talked. For a long time.

Zofia listened.

She didn’t analyse and didn’t look for threats or hidden meanings. She simply listened.

In the taxi on the way home she thought: *that was strange. And good.*

*

Agnieszka closed the old notebook. The new one – smaller and lighter – she filled slowly, page by page.

One evening, Weronika wrote to her: “You know it was you who taught me not to apologise before every sentence?”

Agnieszka smiled at the screen and wrote back: “I taught you?”

*

Weronika had begun publishing her blog under her real name. Regularly.

One afternoon in the corridor, Malwina Czajka said, almost in passing: “Good article.”

Surprised, Weronika looked at her, then smiled and replied: “Thank you.”

Just that.

No apology. No explanation. No softening.

*

Siti submitted a proposal for a project she wanted to lead.

In the meeting with Kevin, she said clearly what she wanted to do and why. She didn’t check whether he looked pleased. She didn’t soften her words or add “if that’s okay.”

Kevin listened, then nodded: “OK,” he said. “Let’s try it.”

*

Katarzyna did not cut her strings. She looked at them clearly – perhaps for the first time – and decided, with her eyes open, to stay.

She was fifty-one. She had reached a place no woman before her had held, and she knew exactly what it had cost: two pregnancies she had told no one about, a marriage that had quietly thinned to logistics, and a loneliness no annual review had a column for.

To walk out now, to “find herself,” would mean handing the position back to the very men who had spent two decades insisting she did not belong in it.

So she stayed. Not as a puppet – that was the difference. She stayed the way one chooses to keep a difficult post in a difficult country: deliberately, without illusions, because someone has to hold the door open for the woman who comes next.

“I’m not free,” she told Maya. “I made my peace with that years ago. But the girl behind me might be. That’s the version of winning I can actually have.”

“It’s your decision,” Maya simply said. “Hold the door for others.”

The words were quiet, almost matter-of-fact, yet they carried the force of a quiet vow. Maya looked at her with a deep, bone-level understanding.

For a moment, neither woman spoke. The silence between them felt like an agreement being sealed.

Then Maya gave a small nod – a nod of recognition – as if to say: I see you. I see what this costs. And I will not look away.

*

Thanh looked at the client and said, without justifying or softening it: “I understand that this must be hard.”

The client paused, visibly surprised.

Then he said quietly: "Thank you. People rarely say that."

*

Meilin finished the quarterly meeting and, for seven whole minutes, did not analyse what had gone wrong.

Then for eight.

She was going to beat her own record.

*

Amara wrote an email to the board, including a personal note for the first time: "My country is drowning. I am writing about this not only as an expert, but as someone with a deeply personal reason to care."

One director replied the same day: "This is exactly the kind of communication we have been missing."

Amara read the message and felt something it took her a moment to name.

Visibility.

*

Roksana was given a project to lead. At the first project meeting she sat at the head of the table. That was the place where she belonged.

She spoke, and others took notes. They knew that what she said was worth keeping.

She left the meeting room and stood for a moment in the corridor before going back to her desk. She allowed herself that moment. It was her time.

*

Maya opened the file “Personal – do not open” and added new entries:

“I remember what it’s like to have a voice that is mine.”

“I have eleven friends scattered across more time zones than I can reliably count, and no shared budget. It is the most successful project of my career.”

*

The panic attacks did not vanish. That was not how it worked, and Maya had stopped expecting it to be. But they had changed shape. She knew them now – knew the first flutter under the breastbone for what it was, not a heart about to stop but a body remembering years it had been ordered to feel nothing. When the wave came, on a delayed flight or before a board call, she no longer gripped the rail certain she was dying. She put one hand flat on her chest, the way Joanna had taught her, and counted: one... two... three... four. Sometimes that was enough. Sometimes it wasn’t, and she sat it out. Nineteen minutes, or nine, or two.

What years of small, daily psychological abuse leave behind does not heal like a clean cut. It heals like a bone that set slightly wrong: it carries you, it holds your weight, but it aches when the weather turns – and the ache is information. Her body had spent a decade screaming into a room where no one, least of all Maya, was listening.

Now she listened. That was the change. The end of the silence.

*

None of them was “cured”.

None of them fixed the system.

None of them has forgotten that lift, that conference room, or the kindly spoken sentence that cut deepest.

But each of them – even if only once – heard something other than that familiar daily voice.

You are enough.

Now.

As you are.

Full stop.

*

Puppets have their own legs. And more and more, they remember it. The strings can be cut.

Afterword: Twelve Inner Voices

Through the whole of this story, each of the twelve women carried within her something you will not find in any annual report or job description: an inner saboteur voice running on autopilot.

It is a voice that once protected her – and, having grown far beyond its original purpose, has begun to imprison her.

The inner saboteur is not an illness or a flaw. It's not the enemy. It is an automatic adaptive mechanism, learned over years in response to a specific environment: family, culture, school, early career experiences. Its original task was survival. The problem arises when survival becomes the only goal, with no room left for life.

Here are twelve of those voices, each one carrying a story that refused to stay silent, and the places they may have come from.

Maya

“If you don't achieve, you don't exist. Your worth is your position. Your self-love is your bonus. Don't stop – if you stop, you'll see how much you've lost.”

Maya grew up in a family where success was the language of love. Her mother's “be twice as good” came from fear. She absorbed that fear with the air of the flat on Holland Road. Her inner saboteur turned survival into identity: she could no longer tell where her worth as a person ended, and the worth of her quarterly results began.

Priscilla

“Check. Check again. Are you sure there’s no mistake? Perfection is the only protection against rejection. If you make a mistake, everything you have built will collapse.”

Priscilla inherited a diasporic philosophy: mistakes are a luxury for those who truly belong. Her inner saboteur speaks the language of vigilance. Perfection became her passport – because without it, she feared she would lose her right to be here.

Linh

“I have to be helpful. They have to like me. If I say ‘no’, I will lose their approval. My worth depends on how much I can give.”

In the Confucian tradition in which Linh grew up, social harmony was sacred. Helping others was not weakness – it was virtue. Her inner saboteur took that virtue and turned it into a cage: the only way to be safe is to be needed.

Zofia

“You can’t trust them. There’s always something behind it. Be ready. Caution is survival. Trust is naivety.”

Zofia grew up in a country where distrust of institutions was a survival skill. Her inner saboteur is the echo of that history. The radar meant to protect her began, over time, to exhaust her instead.

Agnieszka

“It always affects me the worst. It’s unfair. Nobody sees it. If I’d had a better start, a better boss, better circumstances – I’d be somewhere else.”

For years Agnieszka lived with someone who questioned her reality. Her inner saboteur grew from real ground: documenting injustice was a survival tool. Over time it became her entire identity.

Siti

“If I say that, there will be a conflict. If there’s a conflict, something will break. Better keep the peace. Difficult things disappear if you don’t touch them.”

Siti grew up at the intersection of Malay, Chinese-Singaporean and Western expectations. All three cultures valued harmony. Her inner saboteur compiled the strictest rules from each: stay quiet, avoid, don’t make problems.

Katarzyna

“If they don’t control it, something will go wrong. Only I know how to do it properly. Delegating is a risk I can’t afford.”

Katarzyna had learned that if she didn’t control everything, the outcomes of her work ended up under someone else’s name. Over time, control became the only way she knew how to own anything.

Thanh

“Emotions are inefficient. Stick to the facts. Analysis is safe. If you start to feel, you’ll lose control.

As a child, Thanh watched her family fall apart and drew one conclusion: emotions equal pain, analysis equals safety. Her inner saboteur is still thirteen years old, trying to protect her.

Meilin

“Your colleague made a mistake – incompetent. You made a mistake – fundamental limitation. If you lower your standards by even a millimetre, everything will fall apart.”

Meilin was raised with the same “three times as good” philosophy as Priscilla. But her inner saboteur added a ruthless double standard: lenient toward others, merciless toward herself.

Weronika

“They have to like me. I have to agree. Wait until someone more senior says it first. Your voice is too small for your thoughts.”

Weronika grew up in a generation told to “be authentic” while simultaneously being taught not to stand out. That dissonance created two versions of her: confident on the blog, invisible in the office.

Amara

“I have to see the threat before it arrives. If I lower my vigilance for even a moment, something will surprise me. Safety is permanent combat readiness.”

Amara spent years as the only Black woman in nearly every room. Her hyper-vigilance is not paranoia – it is a rational response to a world that has not consistently confirmed she belongs.

Roksana

“You have to prove that you are the same as before. That motherhood hasn’t changed anything. That you still deserve this place. Prove it. Prove it. Prove it.”

Roksana returned from maternity leave into a system with no procedure for return – only for proving that nothing had changed. Her inner saboteur absorbed that expectation and turned it into a permanent command.

*

There is no single moment when everything changes. Maya did not wake up one morning as a different woman. Priscilla did not make one decision that erased years of silent documentation. Linh did not say “no” in a meeting and suddenly become someone who had never been afraid to speak. The changes that matter are rarely spectacular. They are small, quiet, and entirely your own. They are the moment you say the sentence instead of apologising for it.

They are the evening you close the laptop instead of checking your emails for the sixth time and drink your tea while it is still hot. They are the moments in the meeting room when your voice is a little steadier than the fear that came before it. They are the Sunday afternoon by the window when you open the file called “Personal – do not open” and write:

I remember who I was before I learned to make myself smaller.

*

This story began with twelve women in three cities – and one who was always somewhere between them – who didn’t know they were anything but alone. Each believed it was her story alone – her problem, her weakness, hers and no one else’s. Not one of them was the only one. And perhaps that is the simplest sentence in this whole book – and the hardest one to truly believe when you are standing at midnight with a cup of cold tea, unable to remember the last time you felt happy. Your story is not the only one either. And that doesn’t make it smaller. It makes it real. It means you are in company – even when you feel most alone.

*

Puppets have their own legs and the strings can be cut. And moment by moment – without fanfare, without a grand gesture, without a single breakthrough moment – they begin to remember.

Your Move

Each of the twelve women in this story did, at some point, something small and important: she paused only to hear her own voice – the quieter one that had been drowned out for years. Below are a few steps that may help.

Cut one string

Maya once adjusted her voice just by half a tone to match the temperature of the room. Not every string can be cut at once. Some are older, wound tighter, buried deeper under years of careful tuning, but you can start cutting one slowly, gradually if you are not ready for radical changes. Which do you feel most strongly? The demand for perfection? The command never to trust? The belief that your voice is too small? Start there. Only there.

Listen to your other voice

Weronika had two versions of herself. When she wrote under her real name, she discovered they could exist in the same person. Where are you most yourself – beyond roles and expectations? Even if it is only one evening a week, one sentence spoken aloud, one choice made without permission.

Name what you feel before you analyse it

For years Thanh encrypted emotions so they wouldn't disturb her thinking. But emotions are data too – often faster and more accurate. When you leave a meeting and feel something difficult to name, stay with it for a moment. Don't explain. Don't justify. Just ask: *what is this telling me?*

Find your lake

Katarzyna had the Masurian lakes and her kayak. Linh had Hoàn Kiếm Lake at sunset. Priscilla had Friday afternoons with *laka*. Each had a place where the inner saboteur lost some of its power. The place wasn't magic. It was their choice – a preferred spot where they could hear themselves.

Let someone hear you

On one Sunday, twelve women did something rare: they told the truth about what they wanted – not to HR, not to a boss, but to one another. You don't need eleven women across half the world's time zones. One person who truly listens is enough.

Remember: the strings can be cut

The shadow factory waits for your inattention. But the moments you see the strings – something changes. Every small “no”, every sentence spoken in your own voice, every decision made without asking permission is a string cut. And with every string cut, the puppet remembers, more clearly, that she has her own legs.

*

These are questions for you alone, not for anyone else's eyes. There's no need to answer them right away, or even out loud. You don't have to answer these on paper. You don't have to answer them today. But somewhere – on a tram, in a queue, at the table with a cup of tea – you might let one of them sit with you.

When was the last time you did something at work simply because you wanted to? Not because it was expected, strategic, or appropriate. Just because. Can you remember? When did you stop?

Whose voice is the one that tells you you're not enough? Trace it back. Is it yours or did you inherit it from someone who was also afraid?

Which of the twelve women did you recognise most? What does that recognition tell you about the string you carry?

What do you do with tension that has nowhere to go? Where does it land in your body – and what is it trying to tell you?

If you knew, with certainty, that you were not the only one – that half the women you pass tomorrow carry a version of the same silence – what would you let yourself do differently?

What is the one small thing – a sentence, a “no,” a choice made without permission – that you could do this week? Not the radical transformation but just the first, small string cut.

These are questions that admit no right answers. Once spoken, they refuse to be un-asked.

*

Maya, Priscilla, Linh, Zofia, Agnieszka, Siti, Katarzyna, Thanh, Meilin, Weronika, Amara, Roksana. Twelve different voices. And one shared moment: the moment they stopped believing they were the problem.

*

The inner saboteur voice never disappears completely. The strings do not vanish the moment you see them. But seeing them changes everything. When you know a string exists, you can decide whether to let it pull you or not. You can hold it loosely. You can cut it. You can put your foot on the ground and remember that you have your own legs.

A puppet who knows she is a puppet ceases to be a puppet in the full sense of the word. She still feels the tug of the strings, but she begins to ask the question the theatre never expected:

Who is holding them? And do I really have to let them?

The intensity of the voice changes. The answer you give it changes. Quietly, without fanfare or grand gesture, it is you who switches off the autopilot.

The autopilot works so well precisely because it is invisible. You don't feel it switching on. It activates itself in moments of tiredness, pressure, or fear. It takes the controls and says, calmly:

I know this, I know how it works, leave it to me.

And you let it. Because it is efficient. Because it delivers results. Because it asks nothing of you.

But it is you who holds the button that switches it off. You have always held it – in your pocket, in your hand, hidden beneath layers of “I ought to”, “I must”, and “this is how it’s done”.

Switching it off is a quiet moment in which you say:

This time – me.

This time consciously.

This time not on autopilot.

*

If you have ever dimmed your light, swallowed your voice, or wondered whether the cost of staying “acceptable” was becoming too high – know this: you are not alone.

Many women carry these same silent battles, believing their story is theirs alone. It isn’t. The experiences in this book are drawn from real lives, and the quiet struggles continue in boardrooms, offices, and living rooms across the world. If you need support, community, or a space where you can speak freely and be fully seen, you are warmly invited to join the Make It Clear Sisterhood – a private global group for women navigating leadership, identity, and authentic power.

Scan the QR code below to find women who understand,
ready to move forward with you.



For Groups & Teams

The Shadow Factory was written to be talked about – out loud, with others, the way the twelve women finally talked to one another. There are no correct answers. The most useful conversations usually begin where people disagree.

Which of the twelve women did you recognise most immediately – in yourself, or in someone you know? What made the recognition so sharp?

The book argues that "harm does not require ill will." Do you agree? Were any of the characters in these stories villains – or something more uncomfortable?

Each woman has an "inner saboteur" voice that once protected her. Which protective voice do you carry? What was it originally trying to keep you safe from?

Maya learns that "yes" means something different in Singapore, Hanoi, and Warsaw.

Have you ever been "speaking a different language" with a colleague without realising it? What was lost in translation?

Siti talks about the invisible "part-time job" of managing safe spaces, and Meilin about being three people in one office. What invisible labour do you perform that never appears in any job description?

The "shadow factory" is described as running without ever raising its voice. Where have you seen it operate – and is naming it out loud safe, in your world?

Not every woman in the book "wins," and some changes cost more than others. What did you make of the women who stayed, or who paid a real price? Is leaving always the brave choice?

The book ends with the idea that "puppets have their own legs." What would cutting one string look like for you, this month? What is stopping you?

The women discover that the simplest, hardest truth is: I was never the only one. Why is that sentence so difficult to believe when you are inside it?

If your organisation read this book, which chapter would make people most uncomfortable – and why is that the one worth discussing?

What is one concrete thing – a policy, a habit, a conversation – your team could change so that someone like Roksana, Siti, or Amara would not have to carry the cost alone?

If this book opened a conversation you don't want to end, you are warmly invited to continue it within the Make It Clear Sisterhood – a global space for women navigating leadership, identity, and authentic power.

About the Author

Sylwia Kulesza knows these stories from the inside, from more than twenty years in meeting rooms across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. She spent those years as a senior executive – building and delivering multimillion-dollar strategies, and learning, year by year, how much it costs a woman to stay true to herself in systems built by others, for others.

She worked at mBank in Poland, Standard Chartered Bank across multiple markets from its Singapore headquarters, and Techcombank in Vietnam. She led digital transformations, developed customer engagement strategies, designed new operating models, and managed multicultural teams – constantly navigating European, Asian, and Middle Eastern perspectives in environments where culture, hierarchy, and unwritten rules quietly decided whose voice mattered and whose did not.

She watched intelligent, ambitious women arrive with dreams and – slowly, almost without realising – learn to make themselves smaller. She saw it in others. She recognised it in herself.

*

This book is no accident. It is Sylwia's answer to a question she asked herself for years: what would change if women knew they were not the only ones? If they heard their own story in someone else's words and finally felt seen – before the price of adjusting became too high?

Each of the twelve protagonists carries a fragment of a real story. The names have been changed. The mechanisms have not.

*

Today Sylwia is a certified coach (Newfield & ICF) and the founder of Make It Clear – a global coaching and training organisation that supports women in leadership to build strong, authentic professional presence and recover their own voice.

She is also the creator of the MIC Sisterhood, a private global space for ambitious women who refuse to lose themselves while succeeding. This intimate community brings together women from different continents for deep connection, shared wisdom, and genuine support – a place where they no longer have to walk the path alone.

She helps women at every level, those delivering exceptional results yet still feeling unseen, and those simply seeking a different path from the one they have known.

Her approach combines analytical precision with a deep understanding of how our way of being – our body, language, and emotions – shapes our experiences and results.

She does not teach women to become someone else. She helps them return to themselves.

She divides her time among Poland, Vietnam, Singapore and Dubai, although her phone appears to exist in four time zones at once.

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Disclaimer

Disclaimer

The stories, experiences, and reflections presented in this book are drawn from real events, interviews, and personal accounts. Names, identifying details, and certain circumstances have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental where modifications have been made. All companies, banks, and institutions depicted in the narrative are fictional. Any names of organisations used in the stories are invented and do not refer to – and should not be associated with – any of the author’s former or current employers, or any real institution. References to the author’s professional background in the “About the Author” section are factual and entirely separate from the fictionalised settings of the stories.

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