TIMELESS INTELLIGENCE

What Doesn't Age
in the Age of AI



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BARIŞ KARAKULLUKÇU

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Barış Karakullukçu

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English translation reviewed
by Barış Günay and Burak Güney

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This book is based on the author's own memories and on publicly available sources. Out of respect for their privacy, some people are referred to only by their first names or their roles. Sources for research findings are given in the "Notes and Sources" section at the end of the book.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE
THE LETTER AND THE BUS 11

BEFORE YOU USE THE MIRROR
FOUR RULES 21

FIRST STOP
BECOMING YOURSELF

CHAPTER 1
THAT BUS AT THIRTEEN 27

CHAPTER 2
THE ONLY CONSTANT IS CHANGE 35

CHAPTER 3
CURIOSITY IS A SUPERPOWER 45

CHAPTER 4
WRITE YOUR OWN STORY 56

CHAPTER 5
NOT PROVING, GROWING 66

FIRST STOP
CLOSING 74

SECOND STOP
FINDING A SEAT AT THE TABLE

CHAPTER 6
DON'T WAIT TO BE NOTICED; CREATE VALUE 77

CHAPTER 7
THE ONLY WOMAN AT THE TABLE 88

CHAPTER 8
FALL, GET UP, KEEP GOING 99

CHAPTER 9
FROM INTUITION TO SYSTEM 110

CHAPTER 10
HOLDING THE HELM IN A STORM 121

CHAPTER 11
ENJOY THE CLIMB 129

SECOND STOP
CLOSING 137

LAST STOP
PASSING THE BATON

CHAPTER 12
NOT THE TOOL, BUT CHARACTER 141

CHAPTER 13
LET IT BE YOUR MIRROR,
NOT YOUR ANSWER MACHINE 152

CHAPTER 14
YOUR SECOND BRAIN 165

CHAPTER 15
BUILD SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE 174

CHAPTER 16
NOW IT'S TIME FOR YOUR BUS TO LEAVE 186

EPILOGUE
THE LETTER YOU WILL WRITE 195

SIXTEEN DIAGNOSES
YOUR TOTALS 198

THE FOUR CORNERSTONES AT A GLANCE **209**

THE FIFTH MOVEMENT: PASSING THE BATON **211**

THE MIRROR LIBRARY **213**

NOTES AND SOURCES **228**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS **238**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR **240**

To Barış Günay and Burak Güney —
you are fifteen and seventeen,
at the age when you have begun to think
about the future and to question it;
it won't be long before you make your decisions, board
your own buses, and set out.
I began writing this book for you.
And I wanted to give it as a gift
to the generation growing up with AI, my dear
nieces and nephews among them;
to everyone who, in an age of uncertainty,
in the middle of a high-tech transformation,
is about to pack their own suitcase
to set out on a journey true to who they are and walk
on their own two feet.
This book began for the two of you.
It was completed for all of you.

İlim ilim bilmektir
İlim kendin bilmektir
Sen kendini bilmezsin
Ya nice okumaktır

Knowledge is knowing what knowledge is,
Knowledge is knowing yourself.
If you do not know yourself,
What good is all your reading?

– Yunus Emre



Antalya Bus Terminal, 1988. Age thirteen.

PROLOGUE
THE LETTER AND THE BUS

I began writing this book for my two sons.

For Barış Günay and Burak Güney. They are fifteen and seventeen; they are getting ready for university. In a few years, each of them will pack his own suitcase, board his own bus, and begin his own journey at university in another city, far from his family. And as I wrote this book, I couldn't stop thinking about the bus I boarded nearly forty years ago, when I was almost their age.

There were things I wanted to tell them. Things a mother, a woman who has walked her own road, wants to say when her children reach the threshold. I sat down and started writing.

Then I noticed something.

For years, I have been hearing the same question. I speak at universities; I sit at the same table with young entrepreneurs and people who want to start their own ventures; I talk with people in their early twenties starting their first jobs. The words change, but the question always stays the same: In a world changing this fast, what will become of me?

That question did not belong only to my sons. It was the question of everyone their age.

So I am turning this letter to you.

I don't know you. I don't know how old you are, where you are, what threshold you are standing at. But if you've started reading this book, you are probably standing somewhere, and there is a road in front of you. That's enough for me.

I thought for a long time about where to begin. Then I realized I didn't need to think at all. The place where everything began is clear.

Antalya Bus Terminal, 1988.

I am thirteen years old. I have a suitcase in one hand, and a bus bound for İzmir is in front of me.

The suitcase is too big for me. Or I am too small for the suitcase; at that age, it's the same thing. I had placed in the top hundred nationwide in the high school entrance exam and won a place at İzmir Fen Lisesi, a state science high school and one of the most demanding high schools in Türkiye. I was the only person from my city to get into that school. In the city I was going to, I had no relatives, no acquaintances, and no one to show me the way. From then on, I would have to handle everything on my own.

My mother was going through her last bits of advice, something like this, as I remember it: "Take care of yourself, eat properly. Don't catch a cold. Write letters."

My little sister was clinging to me, crying. I, on the other hand, was fidgety with excitement. As I walked toward the bus door, my feelings were all mixed up, along with that overwhelming excitement.

I didn't know it then, but this was the first of the thresholds that would appear before me again and again throughout

my life. My struggle to step outside the future drawn for me and find my own way began there.

The next night, alone for the first time in a dormitory where no one knew me, I grew up fast. Because you understand the weight of some decisions not while you are making them, but the first time you are left alone. When the lights went out, I stared at the ceiling; beside the day's excitement, fear sat down too, like an uninvited guest. All night, they kept coming back to check on me. No matter how hard the journey and the experience were, going back never even crossed my mind.

Now I need to tell you about that time.

Ours was a family where no one had graduated from university until then. Most of my friends in the neighborhood didn't go on with school either; the boys went out into the world early, the girls became housewives. Neither my mother, who had held me in her arms at eighteen, nor I knew what the Anadolu lisesi exams, the entrance exams for selective state high schools, were. In the last year of middle school, I could only get into a dershane, a private exam-prep school, on a scholarship; doors that asked for money were closed to us from the start. In front of me, there was neither a map of the future my family had drawn nor a grown-up who understood my wish to draw that map and could help me.

I think about my mother now. She had wanted to study and to work. But the life set before her was a different one: She was married off at sixteen, and by twenty-four she was a mother of four. For years she carried the quiet weight of a potential she never got to use. She didn't lose it. She just never found a space where she could use it, a working life.

And she saw in us the life she couldn't live. The more I studied, the prouder she was of my results. Every top ranking I earned was proof that the possibility she never got to live was possible for her own daughter. In a life full of hard struggles, our successes were the moments she felt best. In her stories, and in the stories of the people around me, we grew up seeing very clearly the difference between standing on your own two feet and not.

At that terminal, though I couldn't have put it this clearly then, I chose a sentence to live by. I found it in my mother's unfinished story:

"I will be a working woman, a strong woman, a woman who stands on her own two feet."

It wasn't a slogan; it was a compass that quietly told me which way to turn at every crossroads. Years later, four women engineers came out of that house: my sisters and me. We scattered to different continents, but we all came out of that same sentence: We didn't see the life cut out for us as enough.

So why am I telling you this?

Because you are at a terminal too. Maybe at the threshold of an exam, maybe of a choice, maybe of a job, or maybe just of the question "what happens next?"

Your bus doesn't look like mine, I know. My uncertainty was a single city: What is waiting for me in İzmir? Yours is a whole world: Which professions will exist ten years from now, which skills will be useful, what will AI take over, what will be left for people? I boarded a single bus; you wake up every morning in a terminal whose timetable has changed.

Throughout this book, I will be honest with you: I don't know the answers to those questions. No one does, and don't believe anyone who says they do.

But there is one thing I've learned in the nearly forty years since that day, and it is also this book's promise: The only constant is change – and still, the pen is in your hand. The ground will always shift. Skills will become outdated, tools will change, what was valuable yesterday will become ordinary tomorrow. You can't stop that. But even in a world where the ground shifts, you still choose who writes your story. I made that choice for the first time at thirteen, and then I had to make it again at every threshold. It doesn't get easier. You just get used to facing the hard parts.

I learned one more thing: Some things are timeless. Curiosity. Judgment. Character. Effort. Doing justice to the work you take on. Getting back up after you fall. Being able to look a person in the eye and tell the truth. Being able to build relationships based on trust. These held true when I was thirteen, and they will hold true in your time, whatever technology comes along. This is where the book's title comes from: Tools change, get updated, get more powerful. But a person with a solid foundation stays on their feet through every technological transformation; they don't age, they don't go stale, they stay relevant. Timeless intelligence is that person. AI will not take the place of that intelligence. But it can make it grow; I'll show you how.

A few words on how to read this book. Then we'll get on that bus.

There are three stops; all on the same bus journey.

- The first stop, **Becoming Yourself**: how that thirteen-year-old girl laid her own foundation.

- The second stop, **Finding a Seat at the Table**: how I learned, in more than twenty-five countries, often as the only woman or the only foreigner at the table, to create value, to keep solving problems and moving forward without giving up in the face of difficulty, and to hold the helm in a storm.
- The last stop, **Passing the Baton**: your time; the opportunities AI brings, holding up a mirror to you, supporting your growth, and passing the baton to you so that you can do more than I did.

Let me say one thing up front, because you'll notice it at the second stop: There are tables there – promotions, executive committees, crisis meetings. You are probably not at those tables yet; I wasn't either, at thirteen or at twenty. But to tell you about the road to those tables, I need to show you the tables. Without seeing the end of the road, I can't explain why the decision at the start of the road matters. So in every chapter, I'll show you exactly where what I learned at that table falls in your life today, even while you are still at the first stop.

I won't hide this either: Not every hand turning these pages may belong to a young person. Maybe you are a parent, maybe an adult fighting your own battle at the table of your own life. It doesn't matter; these lines reach you, too. Yes, I wrote this book for those just setting out; but if it also helps everyone who has never forgotten what it meant to travel those roads once, everyone redrawing their own path at life's new bends, I will be glad.

And if you are about to leave university, or have just left, this book is for you too. Your terminal is the last exam, the first application, the first interview, the first desk that

is yours. You have a diploma in your hand and the same question in your head. So every chapter closes with a short note for you, just before its motto: what that chapter's lesson looks like in the year you step from the classroom into working life.

This book does not have sixteen lessons. It has four cornerstones.

Let me explain. Over the years, I noticed this: The things that really work in life are not traits we are born with. They are like cornerstones: They are laid one by one, by living. Once the foundation is laid, whatever you build on it carries you. When I sat down and counted, there were four.

A caution, because the whole language of this book is built on this comparison: The cornerstone is a comparison, not proof. The foundation of courage you lay in one area does not carry over to another area on its own; every structure needs its own foundation, laid separately.

Action — take the first step. Move forward by taking the first step you can take without waiting for someone to call you.

Curiosity — learn without being asked. Notice what you don't know and go after it. Be the first to pick up the scent of new subjects and meaningful changes; don't wait to be told about them.

Resilience — keep walking. Stay on your feet while the ground shifts. Whatever the difficulty, go all the way without giving up; if you fall, get up and keep walking.

Authenticity — stay yourself. Don't blend into the herd in a crowd, and stay yourself next to the machine too. Stay true to your core; combine your greatest strengths with

your interests, find the area whose results you can vouch for and put your name to, and, without copying anyone else, show your strength and your own original expression.

You may ask where judgment is in this list; I called it timeless a few pages ago. Judgment is not a fifth cornerstone; it is what the four produce together: when you act, stay curious, keep standing under pressure and still know which decisions are yours to make.

The first fourteen chapters tell how these four stones are laid; at the start of each chapter you'll see which stone that chapter lays. At the end, there is also a fifth movement, but it is not a cornerstone: **passing the baton.** The foundation carries you; passing the baton carries someone after you, too.

Let me say this now, because the whole book turns around it: No one can lay this foundation for you. And that is the real danger of the age of AI: If the machine lays the foundation, nothing you build on it will be yours. So the rule is simple: **Hand over the load; never hand over the judgment.**

Every chapter follows the same order because a repeating structure is easier to learn than a repeating life. First I'll tell you about a **moment**, without dressing it up, just as it was. Then I'll tell you the **real feeling** underneath that moment: not the shiny side, but the side I never told anyone. From there I'll draw out a single **principle**. One, no more. Then it's your turn. The order matters: First, a small experiment you'll do on your own, in most chapters without using any "screen." You can write your notes on paper or in the notes app on your phone. Then **Talk to Your Mirror**: a single question you can use if you also want to

take that principle to AI. Just one, because this book's rule is: Paper first, then the mirror. Then **one thing** you can do today. And at the very end, a one-line **motto** to put in your pocket and walk out with. Each chapter also has a short diagnosis, five statements, and one reverse item; I gathered all sixteen at the end of the book in **Sixteen Diagnoses**, so the chapters could end with the story. Answer them honestly, because those statements will tell you how much each chapter is for you. I didn't throw away the questions I didn't use in the chapters; they're all at the end of the book, in **The Mirror Library**. Open it when you need it; not every day. My suggested pace: one chapter a week, sixteen weeks.

A warning about the "Talk to Your Mirror" part, right from the start: We are going to use AI not to give you answers, but to show you to yourself. A mirror is not an answer machine. A mirror doesn't flatter you; it only shows you what you're hiding. If you hand your thinking over to it, the speed you gain is the mind you lose. The last word is always yours. You are the boss; it is your travel companion.

You need to know four more rules before you use the mirror for the first time; I've put them right after this letter, on their own page. Read them before you get to the first question.

As I write this, I think of my sons and our favorite thing to do together: exploring new cities. New York, Dresden, Prague, Paris, Berlin… That moment when we set foot in a city for the first time, trying to figure out its history, culture, and beauty together.

I noticed this: Our best moments in those cities were often when we went off plan, folded the map, and put it in our pocket. We walked the streets without knowing the way. Maybe I have been rehearsing everything I want to say in this book with them for years.

When the bus pulled away, I didn't look back. I went after my dreams; I did whatever they required, and I didn't give up when things got hard. Now I see that it's your turn. Your terminal is more crowded, your timetable more confusing, your buses faster. But the threshold is the same. And the truest thing I can tell you at that threshold is the same thing I told myself that day:

You don't have to be ready to set out. At the stops that came later, I never had to be fully ready either. Nobody gets on ready anyway.

It's all right that you weren't given a map either. They didn't give me one either, and I'm glad they didn't, because I drew my own road. Walking your own road, with its wrongs and its rights, is often the truer way to do life justice.

Don't wait for the map; set your own direction and become the mapmaker.

— Barış

BEFORE YOU USE THE MIRROR
FOUR RULES

I put this here, not at the end of the book, because you should read it before you see the first question.

1. **It makes things up.** When these tools don't know something, they don't go quiet; they produce information that looks true: a book title that doesn't exist, a made-up statistic, a study that was never done… And they present it in very fluent sentences. I'll explain why this happens in Chapter 13. For now, the rule is this: **When a name, number, date, or source comes up, stop and verify it yourself.**
2. **It may not stay where you wrote it.** Most of these tools store what you write, and some of them use it to train themselves. The questions in this book will take you to your most private places: your fears, your mistakes, your family. So build this habit from the start: **Don't write other people's names, don't write details about your health or your family, don't write information that gives away who you are.** Instead of "My classmate Deniz did this," "A friend of mine did this" is enough. What the mirror needs to see is your face, not your identity details. The same rule applies to other people: Don't upload a friend's photo, voice, or something they

wrote to a tool without their permission; it is not your data. And don't share a claim the machine produced without verifying it; the moment you share it, you're the one making things up, not the machine. And once you are working: use only the tool your employer has approved, and never paste customer data, code, or unpublished numbers into a personal account.

3. **Some things need a person, not a mirror.** The exercises in this book were written for hard days: a bad grade, rejection, a fall. But if the kind of difficulty changes, the rule changes too: **If something is affecting your sleep, your appetite, your wish to go to school, or your wish to be kind to yourself, that is not the place for these questions.** There you need a person: a friend, a teacher, someone you trust at home, or a professional if needed. Asking for help is not weakness; it is exactly what we'll talk about in Chapter 2: part of the foundation.
4. **Your age matters.** Most of these tools have an age requirement; some require a parent's consent for anyone under eighteen. Take one look at the rules of the app you're using. A boring sentence, I know. But standing on your own two feet also starts with reading the rules yourself.

And the very first rule once more, this time spelled out: **Hand over the load; never hand over the judgment.** The load is the work of carrying: searching for information, scanning, summarizing, formatting, producing a first draft. You can give these to the machine; still, look at the source once yourself. Judgment is the work of deciding: choosing

which question to ask, telling right from wrong, asking "is this sentence mine?" and having the last word. These stay with you, because every decision you hand over is taken out of your foundation. In this book, every chapter has paper first, then the mirror: first you think, then you ask the machine. Don't change the order.

One practical note: if the mirror asks all its questions at once, write: "One at a time; wait for my answer."

FIRST STOP
BECOMING YOURSELF



The first stop. From here on, I'll tell you about a thirteen-year-old girl. I'll tell it so that when you look at her, you see yourself, not me. Because you, too, will learn what that girl learned that year, at your own thresholds, one by one. I'm only lighting the way a little; you're the one who will walk it.

CHAPTER 1
THAT BUS AT THIRTEEN

Action · *Can I stop waiting and take action?*

① The Scene
Antalya, 1988. A few weeks before the terminal.

I've told you about the terminal. Now let me tell you the real story, how we got to that terminal. Because getting on the bus was the easy part. The hard part was the decision that led to that ticket.

We found out the result from the newspaper. In those years, exam results were published in the newspaper; my mother and I bent our heads over the same page, looking for my name between the lines. Then we found it: top hundred nationwide. One of the most demanding high schools in Türkiye. Seeing my name printed in the newspaper was a strange feeling: as if an official decision had been made about me without my knowing, and I just happened to be reading it.

I was so happy I didn't know what to do with myself. My mother was stunned; a happy kind of stunned, but stunned first. In that moment, I think she saw more than her daughter's success; she saw where that success would carry us. We didn't spread the news around the neighborhood; the news spread itself. My teachers were proud; some of them,

honestly, were happier than we were. My father, on the other hand, just glanced at the newspaper. He wasn't happy, and he wasn't angry. He didn't care. I couldn't understand it that day; now I do: On his map, there was no address for this news to go to. Because of one fact: that school, İzmir Fen Lisesi, wasn't in Antalya but in a faraway city.

No one really understood what I had earned. How could they? No one around us had gone to boarding school, and no one knew what doors it opened. Even I hadn't known what I was getting into when I took the entrance exam for a kolej, a private high school; I had passed, but I hadn't been sent. Now something even bigger lay ahead of us, and the same question: Would I be sent?

Try to understand my father; I understood him years later. He was a man who had left the Black Sea and raised us on the Mediterranean. The future he had mapped out for me wasn't bad; it was safe. A familiar, nearby life with clear limits. A daughter within his sight. In another city, at thirteen, alone in a dormitory: There was no such road on his map. Not for lack of love; it wasn't there because of his love. Someone who wants to protect sometimes shrinks the very thing they protect.

My mother, though, was looking from somewhere else; you already know where. She didn't see danger in that exam result. She saw the continuation of her own unfinished story.

We never had big fights at home; that's not how things worked in our house. Instead, there was a quiet but persistent siege. My mother didn't carry out the siege alone. My teachers stepped in: they explained that a result like this couldn't be thrown away, again and again, without tiring. For years, in fact, whenever those same teachers saw my

mother, they had said just one thing: "Barış? Ten out of ten!" I can't describe what appeared on my mother's face at that moment; but for years, that face was my greatest fuel. With them was my aunt, my mother's sister, who had finished high school as an external candidate, earned a certificate in machine embroidery at a public education center, and managed to become a teacher of it, the only living proof in our family of the sentence "you can get an education." She, too, put her full weight behind this. My father never actually said "all right"; one day, he stopped objecting. Some doors don't open with a bang; they quietly give up resisting.

So where was I in the middle of this siege?

Right in the middle of it. I'll be honest with you: There were two voices inside me. One wanted to go: that excitement that had been stirring in me ever since I saw the school's name in the newspaper. The other voice was sneakier: "What if you can't do it? You don't know anyone. What if you get sick? Can you even sleep without your mother?" The two voices took turns on watch. When I put my head on the pillow, I was sure I wanted to go; in the morning, at breakfast, staying with my sisters seemed easier.

At some point I noticed this (at that age I couldn't have put it into words, but today I can): I was waiting for the two voices to go quiet. I wanted the argument inside me to end, to become clear, to say "I'm ready." That day didn't come. It never came.

The decision was made before my feelings became clear. One morning, just like that: *I'm going*. The fear inside me hadn't dropped by a single decibel. It was just standing behind the decision now, not in front of it.

You know the rest. A suitcase. A terminal. My mother's advice. My sister's tears. And a thirteen-year-old girl walking to the bus door, looking determined from the outside, with two voices still talking inside her.

I got on the bus. The voices got on with me.

> *Your scene: One day, you too got on a bus alone. Maybe your road was the hallway of a new school, maybe a new city, maybe a project you started on a screen. Where were you that day, what was in your suitcase, and what set you on your way?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Over the years, with all the retelling, this story has been polished; I know that. The sentence "she went off alone at thirteen" creates a heroic picture in the listener's mind: a fearless girl, standing tall, eyes on the road ahead.

That picture is fake.

The truth is this: I was afraid. On the first night at boarding school, in that dormitory, staring at the ceiling, fear was beside me. I said this in the Prologue, but I didn't say it all.

Next to the fear there was something else, but not what you think. It wasn't guilt. I never thought, not even for a moment, that going was wrong. It was something else: I knew that once I went there, I would no longer be able to share my troubles with anyone. Because in our house, troubles weren't carried to my mother; her load was already heavy enough. Since I was little, I had solved my problems on my own; upsetting my mother never crossed my mind. That day, next to the suitcase, I packed one more thing, something invisible: Whatever happened, I would handle

it myself. Later I learned this is called early responsibility; at that age, all I knew was its weight.

And deepest of all, the question I couldn't tell anyone: What if everyone was wrong? What if the thing that got me through that exam – the tools I had built for myself, with no one to show me the way – wasn't enough in İzmir? What if, there, among the children whose families had raised and backed them for years, the ones called "proje çocuk," "project kids," I couldn't get good grades?

I got on that bus without knowing the answer to any of these questions. My courage wasn't knowing the answers. My courage was being able to get on without them.

③ The Principle: Courage Is Not a Feeling; It Is a Decision

I want you to take one thing from this story.

Most of us think of courage as a feeling. One day it will come; we'll feel ready, the fear will settle down, and then we'll take the step. We wait to be sure before raising our hand, to feel good enough before applying, for the fear to pass before starting.

That day doesn't come.

I'm past fifty. I've changed countries, run companies, spoken in front of thousands of people. That day still hasn't come. At every big threshold, those two voices still talk. The only thing that has changed is this: I no longer wait for them to go quiet.

Because courage is not a feeling; it is a decision. The difference between a feeling and a decision is this: Feelings come to you; decisions, you make. You can't choose your

feelings; fear comes in, it doesn't knock. But you can choose what you do while fear is in the room. A brave person isn't someone who isn't afraid, but someone who doesn't hand their decision over to fear.

The strange thing is this: The feeling comes after the decision. You don't start because you feel ready; you become ready because you started. I didn't get on that bus because I was brave; I got on, and slowly I became braver. The fear didn't go away completely, but it got smaller because, by living it, I saw, one by one, that each thing I feared could be done.

Fear is often a sign that you are at a threshold. You don't feel ready at the start of anything worthwhile – not when you raise your hand in your first class, not with your first job application, not when you move to a city alone for the first time, not when you share the first thing you've made with the world. The feeling of being ready comes after the threshold.

So the question isn't "Am I afraid?" The fear is already there. The question is this: **Am I making this decision with my fear, or with my mind?**

There is a simple way to tell the difference: Put what your fear is saying into writing. While fear talks inside your head, it feels enormous; once it's down on paper, it shrinks, because it feeds on vagueness, and writing clears vagueness away. At that age I didn't have the sense to do this; I carried the two voices around in my head for months. You can sit that voice down at the table and make it talk.

How? Like this.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, make a **Fear Sheet**. One page, three columns. In the first column, write a threshold you have been putting off crossing; it doesn't have to be big. In the second column, pour out everything your fear tells you about that threshold, uncensored, just the way it talks inside your head. In the third column, next to each fear, write one question and answer it: "If this happens, is there a way back?" At the end of the week, look at the sheet: How many of your fears had no way back? My experience: *Almost none*.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

Paper first, then the mirror. One question; don't accept the first answer.

Separate the Decision from the Feeling

> *Don't coach me or give me advice; just ask me questions. I'm undecided at this threshold: [write it here]. Ask me these three questions in order, and after each of my answers, ask one more question: "Is your fear making this decision, or are you?", "What has waiting to feel ready gained you so far, and what has it cost you?", "Even if your fear is completely right, what is the smallest step still worth taking?"*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Take that one step you've been putting off today: send that message that's waiting to be sent, fill out that application form, say "Can we talk?" to that person. Don't wait to feel ready. If you've read this chapter, you know now: That feeling doesn't come before the step.

If You're Graduating

At your age, the bus is the first job application, the first interview, the first offer in another city. Most new graduates wait to feel ready: one more certificate, one more course, a better CV. That feeling will not come before the application. It comes after the third interview.

If a job asks for ten things and you have six, apply. Whether you are ready is a question for the people across the table to answer. Your job is to get to the table.

⑦ **Motto**

Courage is not a feeling; it is a decision.

CHAPTER 2
THE ONLY CONSTANT IS CHANGE

Resilience · *Can I stay on my feet while the ground shifts?*

① The Scene
İzmir, September 1988.

Nobody asks what happened after you got off the bus; yet that is where the real story begins.

In those first weeks I understood how much of my life at home had rested on an invisible order. When I woke up in the morning, my mother would already be up and would already have put breakfast on the table. The laundry was clean, the house was familiar. All I did was study; my mother's order carried the rest. I hadn't been aware of that order, because I had never felt its absence.

In İzmir, that order didn't exist.

In its place there were bells. The wake-up bell, the meal bell, the study-hall bell, the lights-out bell. We lived inside a big machine where nothing was meant for me in particular, and everyone was treated the same. If you didn't like the food, you went hungry. If you didn't wash your laundry, you had nothing to wear. When you got sick, there was no one to stroke your hair; there was the infirmary. And the dormitory: the breathing of dozens of girls, nights when

someone was crying, nights when someone was laughing, and you in your own bed in the middle of it all.

My mother had said "Write letters"; I wrote them. But my letters had one feature: *Everything was fine*. The food was fine, classes were fine, my friends were fine. Nothing bad could get into those envelopes, because I knew how bad news would change my mother's face. The problems stayed with me; I tried to solve them all myself. Boarding school turned this into a habit. Those letters, now that I think about it, were my first job as an editor: I was writing the publishable version of my life.

But what I really want to tell you is about a strange discovery from those first weeks. The things I struggled with weren't the ones I expected. I had thought I would worry about the food, about missing home. Those were there too, but what really shook me was something else: **The me from home didn't work here.**

At home, I was "the successful girl." In the neighborhood, in the family, at school, everyone saw me that way, and I saw myself that way too. The people around me were telling me who I was, and I had never noticed it. In İzmir, that mirror didn't exist. Here, everyone was the best of somewhere. It was a selection of Türkiye's top hundred students. No one told me who I was anymore; finding out was up to me.

At first this felt like a loss. As if, along with my suitcase, I had left myself behind at the terminal too.

Then, slowly, another process began: my struggle to adapt to the new order. A new identity was taking shape; my own order was settling in. It started with small things: choosing my laundry day, my study hours, and who I would

be friends with, all for myself; and, in a way, I enjoyed that too. I rebuilt everything I'd found ready-made at home here, one by one, with my own hands.

And there was basketball. I told my family I needed to buy a guitar for an elective music class. With the money they sent, instead of a guitar, I first bought a basketball to beat the boredom of the weekends; and the rest of the guitar money vanished the same day, at the first big concert of my life, which I went to downtown after shopping, when my wallet was stolen from my backpack. My music life was over before it began, and I didn't choose that class. Sports, on the other hand, became one of the things I built my life around.

Don't ask where basketball came from; it just came. Even though I didn't know how to play, I started running to the court at every break. First, they let me onto the court because of my ball; then, so I could learn little by little, they tossed me the ball on the sidelines. Every break. The bells meant something else now: The bell meant the court. In my first year, I went to the team tryouts; I didn't make it. The reason was perfectly clear: My height. And I was in no position to argue with that. Basketball has an ancient habit of choosing its players from among the tall ones; I wasn't on that list.

Normally the story ends here. Mine didn't. No one had told me it was supposed to end. I spent the following months on the court, both during school and over the summer break: breaks, late afternoons; always running to the court with the ball in my hands, improving by playing and playing. The next year I went to tryouts again. This time I made it and was in the starting five, the lineup that played the games.

My height hadn't grown in the meantime; I should tell you that. My game had.

The day I made that team, I noticed something: I was no longer "the girl from Antalya who goes to the school in İzmir." I belonged here. Belonging, it turns out, isn't something you're given; it's something you build up on the court, one break at a time.

Years later, I opened my high school yearbook. My classmates had written about me: "Cheerful, always on the move… the only one in our class born in '75." I was the youngest in the class; everyone was a year older than me, and I didn't notice for three years. That I was always on the move, though, was certain.

Years later, one day, I counted. Cities: Antalya, İzmir, Ankara, Istanbul, Frankfurt, and many more. Schools, companies, countries, roles. Every time, the same thing happened: The ground shifted, the order reset, the "old me" didn't work, and I rebuilt myself. A little faster each time.

And that basketball never left my hands. As I approached my forties, while I was CEO of Mudo, together with colleagues from our stores, we founded the company's women's soccer team. For three years in a row, we took part in Kızlar Sahada ("Girls on the Field"), Türkiye's first women's soccer festival; I was on the field all three times, and all three times we finished in the top three, once as champions. I wore number eight. Some cornerstones come with you even if you never name them.

I had done it the first time at thirteen, in that dormitory. That was the hardest one. I'm glad it came at the very beginning.

Your scene: Remember a day when the ground shifted under you: a move, a breakup, a new school. What was the "basketball" you held in your hands that day; where did the strength that kept you on the road come from?

② The Truth Inside Me

I'm putting this in order as I tell it today; at the time it was not in order at all.

The truth is this: Going back never even crossed my mind. That much is true, and I have always been proud of it. But that year I learned what longing is. Some evenings, when study hall ended and the dormitory went quiet, the sound of home would come to me: my sisters' noise, my mother's kitchen. Longing wasn't something dramatic; it was sneaky. It came most often on Sunday evenings. Why always Sunday, I still haven't figured out.

This is still not easy to say: I missed my mirror at home. The eyes that told me "you're successful." Here, those eyes weren't there, and without them, I wasn't sure who I was for a while. It turned out that part of my self-confidence belonged to the people around me, not to me. I learned this at thirteen, in a city where no one knew me. I have learned very few things more valuable than that.

That year I also worked out the difference between longing and fear: Fear calls you back; longing just walks beside you. I took longing along with me and kept walking. I also took the basketball. It turned out to be a better travel companion than either of them.

③ The Principle: Change Fitness

Agility is not a method; it is a cornerstone.

Let me explain. There are two common misconceptions about change. The first is thinking that change will stop one day. "Let this phase pass; everything will settle." It doesn't settle. I've been living this for about forty years; under every ground that settled, a new fault line appeared. In your generation, this will be even faster: the tools you learn today have a lifespan of a few years; some professions that look bright today may last only ten years.

The second misconception is sneakier: thinking that withstanding change is an inborn character trait. "They're very adaptable; I'm not." No. Adaptability isn't inborn; you learn to adapt a little more with every change. When I traveled from city to city for projects, no matter which country I was in, I headed to the bookstores first. I would buy a few magazines, books, and newspapers in a language I could read, settle into a nice café, and catch my breath. Then I would find an English film. Whether I was in Korea or Japan, these made the place feel a little more familiar. People who seem resilient to change aren't the ones who aren't affected by it; they are the ones who have lived through it many times and rebuilt themselves each time. Everyone struggles the first time. What makes the difference is how many times you've been through this process before.

Every change you get through makes the next one smaller. There is a limit; I should tell you that too: Resilience is born from medium-sized difficulties. A person shaken too hard, again and again, and all alone, is as fragile as someone who has never been shaken at all. A foundation settles as it carries a load, not when it is crushed

under it. Don't confuse being shaken with being destroyed. Asking for help when you need it is also part of the foundation. After I lived through and came out of the "old me doesn't work" crisis once at boarding school, the same crisis came in Frankfurt, and I had something in hand: I had done this before. New country, new language, new rules; but the process was familiar: first the feeling of loss, then small routines, then a new me. The better you know the process, the less afraid you are.

Not making the team was also a shift in the ground. I had two options: say, "So I'm not a basketball player," and drop the ball, or accept the conditions and rebuild my game. I couldn't change my height; I could change my game. A year later, I was on the team.

So how is this cornerstone laid? Not with big changes; those are your exams. The cornerstone is laid with small trials and voluntary initiatives: break your habits on purpose now and then. If you always take the same route, change the route; if you always sit with the same people, sit at a different table once; if you always consume the same kind of content, step into a different field for a week. It seems unimportant, but every small break gives your brain the same message: "The order changed, and I'm still here." That message builds up; when the big shake comes, you will already have learned to stay on your feet.

There is also this: Where everything changes, you need something that doesn't change; otherwise, adapting turns into being tossed around. Mine was the sentence I chose at that terminal; every time the ground shifted, that sentence stayed where it was. **Don't confuse the ground with the compass.** Your city, your school, your job, and the tools you

use are the ground; they change, and they should. Your values, your direction, who you want to be are the compass; if you change them along with the ground, you get lost. Adapting means keeping your compass while the ground changes.

At school, you're probably being taught just one thing: making long-term plans. Set the goal, draw the route, put the steps in order. That is the method of a world that has a map. That world no longer exists.

We are actually talking about two separate skills. The first is **drawing a route**: the destination is known, and you plan how to get past the obstacles along the way. The second is **finding a direction**: the destination is changing too, and so are the road and the weather. You're in the fog with no map in hand; only a compass, a few signs, and the people beside you.

In your time, the second skill comes to the fore. It looks frightening, but it's actually reassuring: Finding a direction requires *less* information than making a plan. You don't need to know everything in advance. It's enough to know your next step and the direction your compass is pointing.

What does this mean in practice? Hold your career plan not as a promise but as **a hypothesis to be tested**. Not "I will become this," but "with the information I have right now, this is my best guess. When new information comes in, I'll update it." It's something like the way a scientist works with a hypothesis. You don't defend your hypothesis; you test it.

But doesn't this contradict the book's promise? Didn't I say, "Don't wait for the map; set your own direction and become the mapmaker"? It doesn't contradict it; quite the opposite. Being the mapmaker means *not waiting for someone*

else's map. Finding a direction means knowing that the map you draw yourself will also go out of date one day. Together, the two make a single sentence: You draw the map, but you stay tied not to it, but to your compass.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, **break it on purpose**: Choose one of your routines (route, table, time, order, app – it doesn't matter) and do it differently for seven days. Keep it small; the point is that you choose to do it. Each day, write one line: What did you feel at the moment of the break, and how many minutes did it take for the feeling to pass? At the end of the week, look at your notes. Here is what you'll see: The discomfort will pass a little faster each day. That shortening is the proof that the cornerstone is settling into place. You don't get stronger in the earthquake; you get stronger in the small tremors.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

Ground or Compass?

> *These are the things in my life that are changing right now, or that I'm afraid will change: [list them]. Now sort them with me into two groups: "ground" (things that are natural and necessary to change) and "compass" (values and directions that, if they changed, would make me lose myself). Use your right to push back on me for every item: If you see something I think is compass but is actually a habit, say so. At the end, ask a single question: "If you combined the items left in your compass into one sentence, what would that sentence be?"*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, change just one of your defaults: sit somewhere else, take a different route, try that different thing you always put off once. Watch the discomfort arrive, and watch it pass.

If You're Graduating

At university, the rules were written down: a syllabus, an exam date, a grade. At your first job nobody hands you a syllabus. What made you a good student, knowing the answer before the exam, counts for less now; what counts is how fast you learn rules nobody wrote down.

In your first three months, don't measure yourself by how comfortable you feel. Measure yourself by how many new things you tried. Discomfort in those months is not a sign that you chose wrong; it is the sign that you are changing.

⑦ Motto

You can't choose the ground; you choose your compass.

CHAPTER 3
CURIOSITY IS A SUPERPOWER

Curiosity · *Can I see what I don't know and go after it?*

① The Scene
İzmir, 1991.

A thick book sits in front of me. Not a novel, something more interesting than that: the university preference guide, the booklet that lists every program you can rank on your placement form.

I say this with a smile today, but the hours I spent on that book were the strangest of my life. Think about it: hundreds of pages, thousands of lines, and every line is actually a life. Mark this line and you become an engineer; mark that one, and you become a doctor; mark that one, and you become a teacher. A huge catalog of lives – and a pencil in your hand.

I had a favorite in that catalog, and I'd had it for quite a while: Being a lawyer.

Where had this dream come from? From the idea of defending someone, I think. Standing beside a person and speaking for them; facing injustice with words, building a case: taking evidence piece by piece and building a convincing whole out of it. Lecterns, robes, those big "objection"

moments… In my mind, being a lawyer was a stage like that, and I saw myself there.

Then one day, I came face to face with the reality of that dream.

I had the chance to listen to one of the well-known criminal lawyers of the time, and I asked him about the essence of the profession. He told me not the brochure version of the profession but its reality: the everyday texture of the work, the files, the waiting, the corridors, the years. The ninety percent of the profession that the movies don't show.

As I listened, the stage inside me went dark. The lawyering in my dream was a performance; the lawyering he described was a life. As I listened to that life, nothing stirred inside me. I can't say I felt a great disappointment that day; I felt a strange relief. A single conversation had turned me back from a wrong path that could have lasted for years. With the mind I have today, I can say that this was the cheapest and most profitable research of my life.

So when lawyering was gone, what took its place? In those years, at our school, do you know what the most popular topic among the girls was? Not fashion. Not bands. Engineering. Yes, in the girls' dormitory of a science high school, the future people talked about most was engineering. Everyone's eyes were on it: which engineering, which university, which score.

Leafing through the guide in the middle of that current, I got caught on the name of one department: Industrial Engineering. I didn't fully know what it was; I asked, found out, and read about it. As far as I understood, you look at systems (a factory, a process, an order of things) and you

ask: Why does this work this way? Could it work better? When resources are limited, how do you get the best result?

And something stirred inside me.

I still remember that spark today, because it was familiar. It resembled what had drawn me to the dream of becoming a lawyer, but it came through a different door. Building a case and building a system, it turns out, are two answers to the same question: **how do you get a convincing whole out of scattered pieces?** A lawyer organizes evidence; an engineer organizes processes. Both look at chaos and see order. Both say, "This could be built better."

Of course I couldn't see it that clearly that day. That day I only knew this: When I read that department's line, something stirred inside me; when I read the others, nothing did. That was the only compass I had.

I trusted that compass. I filled out the form: Bilkent, Industrial Engineering. Full scholarship. Any other way was, once again, out of the question for us. The scholarship was the invisible first line of that form.

> *Your scene: Is there a moment when you looked at a list, a job posting, a preference screen and said "this isn't for me"? What did you base that decision on: calculation or excitement? Would you make the same decision today?*

② The Truth Inside Me

If I told you this choice was purely a matter of curiosity, I'd be telling you only part of the story.

That choice involved as much calculation as curiosity. Engineering was safe, and for a family with scarce resources like ours, it meant "a guaranteed job"; it meant "to stand on my own two feet"; you remember that sentence.

How much of my choice was the spark, and how much was the search for a guarantee? At that age I didn't have the honesty to tell them apart. Looking back today, I see that both were there, and I'm not hiding it, because in every big choice you make, both will be there too. What matters is knowing which one is at the helm.

And for years I carried a "what if" inside me. Others never saw it, because I was good on the path I had chosen, and on a path where you're good, no one asks you, "Would you have wanted something else?" But the lines I hadn't marked in that catalog would stir inside me now and then: What if one of those other lives had been mine?

Over time, I noticed this: The road not taken doesn't disappear; it comes back in disguise. I didn't become a lawyer. But I look at the work I've done for thirty years, and I can say that I was always making a defense. The defense of projects, the defense of teams, the defense of ideas. Instead of a case file, I carried a presentation file; instead of a lectern, a meeting table; instead of a robe, a jacket. Every presentation I built with numbers in Frankfurt was actually a hearing. The lawyer inside me didn't die; she changed rooms.

Look, right now I'm making a defense for you, too: the defense of your right to choose your own life. You are the jury.

There is also a second half to the story.

Being a lawyer was the dream of my childhood and my high school years. At university something else happened: films and books became the greatest passion of my life. At first, only as a viewer, only as a reader. Then I turned into that strange kind of person who can't settle for just watching: While watching a film, I started to wonder why

the camera stopped exactly there. Why one scene worked, and why another seemed like a lie.

In my final year, there was also radio. I was one of the students who founded Radyo Bilkent, and I worked ten hours a week on shows. It had no place in my course schedule; it was nowhere in the preference guide. But I learned one thing in front of the microphone that later proved useful in every meeting room: when you're telling someone something, whether they keep listening is your responsibility. Curiosity takes you there, and what you learn there comes back in a place you never planned.

Years later, I apparently told a magazine, "I dream of writing a novel one day when I retire." Last year I retired on paper and moved to a portfolio career. The book in your hands is the first installment of that sentence.

In 2005, as a woman who had long since become an engineer and a consultant, and who, from the outside, was considered to have "a settled career," I bought myself a gift on the day I delivered a big project: a directing course at the New York Film Academy.

I didn't do this as a career plan. I didn't have to explain it to anyone either; since there was no plan in sight, no one asked me to account for it. I went as a film lover, with no expectations related to my work. I was just curious, and I took my curiosity seriously.

Then something strange happened on set. I saw how much directing resembles managing. To shoot a scene, you first need a vision, then a plan, then you bring that plan to life with a lot of people, in limited time, with limited light: strategy, plan, execution. Standing behind the camera and saying "cut," I realized I had been saying the same words

in the project room in Frankfurt. It was just that there it was called a meeting, and here a scene. In a place I had gone to for fun, I found the clearest description of my own profession.

At sixteen, I had a dream. In my twenties, a completely different passion grew. Years later, I went and tried it. None of them got in the way of the others, because I was always doing the same thing: I was following the spark. Only the spark's address kept changing.

People will tell you, "Find your dream." As if there were only one; as if once you found it, you were done. Thirty years later, I can tell you this: A dream isn't found; it's fed. And it is never just one.

③ The Principle: Curiosity Is a Superpower

What excites you is data worth taking seriously.

Most people make life choices based on two criteria: "Is it safe?" "Is it possible?" These matter; I just confessed that they were part of my choice, too. But there is a third piece of data, and most of the time it isn't taken into account at all: **What sparks something in you?** That spark is a signal your mind sends you: "There's fuel for me here." And fuel matters, because every road is long. In a field that doesn't excite you, discipline takes you only so far; in a field that does, work doesn't feel like work. I used to solve optimization problems as if they were entertainment, and I would smile at people who called me "very hardworking"; I was enjoying myself with my hobby.

I always tell students the same thing: Don't lock yourselves into molds; think of yourselves as having infinite

options, try different fields, and discover the choices that excite you most. This is a recipe. It has three parts:

First: Notice the mold. Everyone has an invisible "people like me do this" list in their mind. Molds work in two directions; be careful: Sometimes they close a door ("that profession doesn't come out of families like ours"), sometimes they push you toward a door (like the engineering current in our dormitory: if everyone is flowing there, you flow along without questioning it). Both are dangerous because, in both cases, you aren't the one making the choice; the mold is. My luck was that the direction of the current and the direction of my spark matched. They don't always match. So notice the mold, then listen to your spark.

Second: Taste many things; don't underestimate the importance of tasting. You can't know whether you'll like a dish without trying it; work is the same: you can't measure fit at a desk, only through contact. From a distance, something can look very exciting, but when you listen to the people who do it talk about its hardships, or when you find yourself inside that environment in a factory, you say the sentence "No, this place isn't for me" more sincerely and more strongly. Early specialization looks safe: Choose a field, go deep, and don't stray. But the most accurate path choices come from those who try widely first, then narrow down. I said goodbye to my dream of becoming a lawyer after a single conversation; getting to know the profession even a little saved me years. Tasting has never been this cheap in any age: people are easy to reach, courses are open, tools are at your fingertips. I had a guidebook and some luck; you have a world.

But I know where most young people get stuck here: *"Who am I for that person to make time for me?"*

There is someone who spent years observing to find the answer to this question. A researcher named Kimberly Elsbach watched people who pitched their ideas to high-level people: first those pitching screenplays in Hollywood, then designers and entrepreneurs. Dozens of pitches, dozens of interviews. What she finally saw was this: The people listening, without realizing it, sort the people pitching into three types. One is the **professional**: Smooth, prepared, flawless. One is the **artist**: Odd, messy, brilliant. And the most unexpected third one: **The novice.**

A novice is someone without experience. My conclusion from this observation is this: Being a novice isn't a disadvantage *as long as you don't hide it*.

When you try to hide it, it becomes a weakness; when you own it openly, it becomes an invitation. People are surprisingly generous to a young person who says, "I don't know this work, but I'm really curious; would you tell me about it?" Because that sentence invites the other person to *teach*. And one of the things people love most is explaining something they know to someone who is genuinely curious about it. A young person trying to look like an expert gets evaluated; a young person who wants to learn gets taken under someone's wing.

I did this without realizing it at sixteen, while talking with that lawyer. I knew nothing, and I didn't hide it. And he told me about his profession as it really was, because in front of him was someone who wanted to learn.

But a warning, because this is a matter of time: Being a novice is a temporary form of capital. It doesn't accumulate;

it expires. At twenty, saying "I don't know anything, would you teach me?" opens every door; no one expects you to know, everyone is ready to explain. At forty, the same sentence still works, but now you have to choose which door to say it at; if you say it at every door, it creates other problems. Right now you are in the easiest question-asking period of your life. Spending this capital means asking the question: asking it straight, without hiding that you don't know, without acting "as if you know." If you don't spend it, that is, if you swallow your questions and look like you know, the capital quietly melts away: years pass, the price of asking the same question grows, and you're left with neither that capital nor the right setting for asking.

Third: Mourn the closed door, but don't bury the curiosity. Every choice is a giving-up; no one says this, but it's true. When you choose one road, the others close, and that really is a loss; don't belittle it, feel it. But the door closes, and curiosity finds a corridor. That interest inside you that can't be buried (defending, stories, music, games, design, whatever it is) finds a new form for itself on the road you chose, as long as you don't starve it completely. Keep it small, but keep it alive.

Let me add one warning too, because I promised honesty: The sentence "follow your excitement" is dangerous on its own. Excitement is the needle of the compass, but on its own it isn't a road; it needs effort, patience, and reality. My excitement about becoming a lawyer faded when I heard the reality. So it was excitement about the stage, not about the profession. That is exactly what tasting is for: Collect excitement as data, test it through contact, deepen what holds up.

Let me also tell you how to go deep, because saying "go deep" is easy. Five steps: Choose a problem and make it small and real, like a school club filling in the same table by hand every week, or struggling to collect data from different places and put it together. Learn what you need to solve that problem, not everything, just what the job requires. Produce a small solution and get a real person to use it. Take the criticism; not "it looks nice," but "this part doesn't work." Fix it and hand it over once more. When you've gone around this loop three times, you are no longer just curious; you are someone who has produced work in that field. Mastery is nothing more than this loop repeated many times.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, do a **tasting**: From a field you're curious about but have called "not for me," choose one small thing that is learned by doing. For example, write a piece of code, shoot a short video, try a design, write a piece of text, or cook a dish using proper technique. Don't aim for mastery; the goal isn't a product, it's data. When you're done, ask yourself a single question: "How did time pass while I was doing this?" If it went fast, you've found a spark. If it went slowly, that's data too: You've closed a "what if" in your mind at low cost. Both results are a gain.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

Mold Hunt

> *I want to test the molds about careers and the future that circulate around me. I'll make two lists: statements that push me away from a path [e.g., "people like us can't become X," "there are no jobs in that major"] and currents that push me toward a path [e.g., "everyone is going into Y," "people from our school always become Z"]. For each*

item, tell me three things: (1) Which era's reality might this belief/current come from? (2) How valid is it still today – assess it realistically, using current counterexamples and changed conditions. (3) What is the smallest, cheapest way to test it? Don't bend the truth to encourage me; if there is a genuinely valid constraint, say that clearly too – but separate "untried" from "impossible."

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, send a single message to one person whose work you're curious about: "I'm curious about your work; could I take fifteen minutes of your time to ask you some questions?" I did this in 1991 by asking a lawyer about his profession; one conversation closed off a wrong road that could have lasted for years. You'd think people don't like talking about their work, but it's the opposite: most of them stay silent because no one asks.

If You're Graduating

The novice's capital I wrote about in this chapter is at its highest right now, in your last year and your first year at work. Nobody expects you to know; everybody is ready to explain. Spend it.

Before you choose between two paths, talk to two people on each: one who started a year ago and one who has been there for ten. Internships, part-time projects, and volunteer work are all tastings. Don't treat your first job as a life sentence. Treat it as your first serious tasting.

⑦ Motto

Excitement is data worth taking seriously.

CHAPTER 4
WRITE YOUR OWN STORY

Action · *Can I stop waiting and take action?*

① The Scene
Ankara, Bilkent, 1995.

Some lives turn on big decisions. Mine turned on an application form.

I was in my third year. That day there was a career event on campus for seniors; I was walking around with friends from the fourth year; I tagged along behind them and went in. At one table sat the recruiting team from what was, back then, one of the coolest companies to work for. They were describing one of Türkiye's first big technology transformations: one of the first large-scale implementations of a system that very few people in the country had even heard of, ERP. The more I listened, the more that spark grew; the spark I told you about in Chapter 3. Building a whole out of scattered pieces. Seeing how a system works from the inside. Exactly where my curiosity lived.

Job application forms lay on the table. **The event was for seniors;** I was not a senior.

Let me tell you exactly what happened inside me in that moment. First, the familiar voice spoke. You remember it from Chapter 1, one of the voices that got on the bus with

me: "It's not you. This is for seniors. Don't embarrass yourself." It made sense. That was the rule, and rules are written a little more firmly for people like us who don't come from solid ground; I had learned that early.

But then I noticed something else, and that noticing has stayed with me ever since: **That event wasn't saying "no" to me. It was waiting for me to say "no" to myself.**

No one stood at the door to turn me away. No one had looked at my form and torn it up. I hadn't been rejected; I hadn't even tried yet. The only obstacle between us was the line "for seniors" and how I would react to it. I didn't dwell on what year I was in; I didn't ask the people there, "Can third-years fill this out too?" I filled out the form, wrote my graduation year, explained my motivation for an internship, and left it on the table.

The answer came: I was called for an interview. They must have liked my answers, because I started work at headquarters, at the very heart of the processes, in a role that also coordinated the interns at the factory. While I was still an intern, my working life began with intense eight-to-eight days instead of nine-to-six, and I worked those hours for most of my thirty years.

That summer I found myself in Istanbul, right in the middle of that transformation. I was the youngest, most junior person on the team; seniors and professionals surrounded me. I read manuals through the nights, took the screens apart, and taught myself a system no one had taught me. It wasn't easy; I wouldn't have wanted it to be.

One day, and I have never forgotten this, as I sat in front of the screen, the scattered numbers suddenly made sense. For the first time, I really saw where a process got stuck,

which figure was saying what. For the first time, the system had spoken to me.

After that, things sped up. Within a month I hadn't just learned the modules; I was teaching them. On the team I had joined as an intern, I was now explaining the system to others. I produced several of the most important pieces of the project. It paid off, and in ways I didn't expect: My pay was raised, my internship was extended.

At the end of two months there was also a reward: a round-trip plane ticket to Antalya for a weekend.

It was the first time in my life I was getting on a plane. I was twenty, and the ticket was the reward for my own work. I sat by the window (no one sits in the aisle on their first flight), and I remember thinking, as I looked down: Years ago, I had left this city by bus from that terminal down there. Now I was coming back to the same city from the sky.

What had closed the distance between the girl who left by bus and the girl who came back by plane? A form. A form filled out without being asked.

When I left that internship, I had two things with me. One was visible: having worked on one of the first teams in Türkiye to implement that system. It was a line on my résumé that would open doors for years. The other was invisible but more precious: I now had a story. The story of "She didn't meet the requirements, but she applied, got in, and learned the job." No one could have given me that story. And no one could take it back.

> *Your scene: Remember something you didn't apply for because you didn't fully meet the requirements. Who was standing at the door: them, or you? Is that door still there?*

② The Truth Inside Me

When I left the form on the table, did my hand shake? It did.

When people tell this story today, it looks like a picture of determination; from the inside, it wasn't like that. For days after I left the form, I felt like a stowaway, as if I had jumped into a garden I shouldn't have entered and someone would blow a whistle at any moment. Don't think that voice went quiet even after I was accepted: In Istanbul, on that team, in the first days I sat there as the youngest person at the table, the same sentence kept running through my head: "What if they notice?" Notice what? That I wasn't really supposed to be there. As if I had slipped in through an open door, not through hard work.

I couldn't silence that feeling, so I put it to work. The fear of "what if they notice" pushed me to be better prepared than everyone else. I read the manuals not once but three times. I learned without being asked, did things without being told. I didn't feel I belonged there, so I stopped trying to feel I belonged and started producing. Over time, I saw this: The people at the table had long since forgotten what year I was in. The only thing they saw was whether the work got done.

I actually knew that stowaway feeling. I had first felt it at five.

I taught myself to read at home. Then my friends in the neighborhood started school, and I stayed home; I wasn't old enough. I wouldn't accept it. I wouldn't leave my mother alone; every day the same thing: *I'm going too*. In the end, my mother took me to a village primary school outside Antalya and, despite the age limit, found a way: I sat at a desk

as an unregistered "stowaway" student. I was five and officially I wasn't there, but every morning I was there.

I'm not telling this as a heroic story; a five-year-old isn't a hero; she just wants something very much. But looking back today, I always see the same line: Not accepting what was imposed on me, looking for a way instead of permission, started fifteen years before that form. That "hunger to learn" inside me looked for another door if one was locked, and if there was no door, it made itself one. The form at Bilkent was nothing new; it was the same child, a little grown up.

One night, on my way back to the dorm, that sentence came to mind, the one I had chosen at the terminal, as I looked at my mother: "*I will be a working woman, a strong woman, a woman who stands on her own two feet*." That night I understood that filling out that form was the first real signature on that sentence: the signature the five-year-old stowaway student couldn't put down, but had long since earned. Standing on your own two feet, it turns out, isn't only a matter of money; it's also a matter of permission. Waiting for someone to come and make room for me was also a way of depending on others.

③ The Principle: Who Holds the Pen of Your Story?

Here is the idea I want you to take from this chapter: **Under most of the "no"s in your life, there is no one else's signature; there is your own.**

Look around you: most people haven't been rejected. If they haven't tried, they can't count as rejected either. Schools never applied to, messages never sent, questions

never asked, job postings passed over with "that's not for me"… None of these contain anyone else's "no." Each one contains a quiet "no" the person gave themselves. Systems filter people out anyway; they don't need your help with that too. Your job is to use your share of "yes" to the full and to leave the work of saying "no" to those who are actually authorized to make that decision.

Some people think "write your own story" is a fancy slogan. It isn't; it's a very concrete stance: **Instead of waiting for someone to come and make room for you, take the step yourself that will justify that place.** Other people write the story of the person who waits. And they usually write it badly, because they don't know you. When you pick up the pen, you may make mistakes, but at least the story will be yours.

Now, two important distinctions, because this principle is very easy to misunderstand:

First: Not waiting for permission is not the same as ignoring the rules. The reckless person takes risks for attention; the person who takes initiative takes responsibility to produce results. When I filled out that form, I didn't break a rule: The form had no year requirement; the event was aimed at seniors, and I would graduate in a year. But let me also say this: I didn't ask. If I had asked, maybe they would have said "no"; I filled out the form before getting that "no." I tested an assumption and took on the cost of the test. Whether I was accepted or not, I was ready to live with the result. This is the signature of initiative: you take the step and pay the bill. A step that sends the bill to someone else is not courage; it's bullying.

Second: Getting through the door isn't enough; you have to fill the place you enter. Filling out the form is the beginning of the story, not the whole of it. If I hadn't shone in that internship that summer, this story would be told as the story of "a student who didn't know her place." Courage opens the door; work is what keeps it open. In my own words, this comes down to two points; I repeat them in all my talks: One, you will know what you want; two, you will work. The order matters. Without the first, the second isn't working; it's just getting tired.

Each of these steps builds up in you. There's a name for this, which I learned years later: identity capital. Like money, but a more precious kind of savings: the sum of the experiences you've lived, the risks you've taken, the stories you can tell. That internship gave me my first identity capital: a proof. The proof that "I am someone who finds a way even when I don't meet the requirements."

Years later, I did the same thing again: during the 2000–2001 crisis, when my company's work stopped and I sat idle for six months, I took all my savings, took out a bank loan, and enrolled in a master's program. No one pushed me; no one encouraged me either. In the month the ground shifted, I invested in myself; later, in Germany, when I asked for responsibilities beyond my age, that diploma was the strongest proof I had. That's how capital works: It earns interest. That first story opened the next door a little; that door, the next one.

But I won't hide one thing: Building stories has a cost, too, and not everyone can pay it with the same ease. Doing unpaid internships for months, accepting a low salary "for the experience," investing a year in yourself – these are a

luxury. I didn't have it either. I paid for that master's degree with a loan, and until I paid that loan off, I did the math every month. So my rule became this: Write down a decision's cost in advance: money, time, and what you'll miss in the meantime. Then ask honestly: How many months can I carry this cost, and what happens if no one helps? Take on as much as you can carry. Don't mistake a cost you can't carry for courage; that's not courage, it's debt. Courage is the name for a risk whose math has been done. Once the math is done, the rule is this: The most valuable thing you save in your twenties isn't a salary; it's a story to tell. A salary gets spent; a story builds up.

Let me draw a line, because this principle can be misused. Taking on your share and taking responsibility for everything are not the same thing. On my path, there were scholarships from the start of high school to the end of university; there was my aunt who helped whenever I called; there was a manager who stood up and defended me at the right moment; without these, my working or fighting alone would not have been enough. On your path, too, things will happen that don't depend on you: money, the city, family, a door closing that year. Don't call them "my fate." The rule is this: Do what you can with what you have, then look ahead. Some environments you can change, some you leave, and in some you find support and stand up for your rights. "Work harder" isn't the answer to every problem; sometimes the answer is "this isn't the right place."

Finally: learn to recognize the "it's not time yet" voice inside you. That voice speaks very reasonably: "let me graduate first," "let me get some experience first," "let me feel ready first." You learned in Chapter 1: That feeling doesn't

come. Learn to turn this voice's sentences around: "It's not time yet" is very often "I'm scared" wearing a suit. If it's fear, go back to Chapter 1: Fear can't make the decision; you do.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, **return a "no" to its owner.** Find something you ruled yourself out of by saying "I don't meet the requirements" or "they won't take me": an application, a competition, a community, a job posting, a person. Then take back your own "no" and leave the decision to its real owner: Apply, write, ask. The rule is clear: You're not trying to control the result; you're only giving up the right to rule yourself out. If the answer that comes is "no," write it down: Did the world fall apart? If the answer is "yes," underline it twice: Now you've seen who was closing that door.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

The Belief Flipper

> *I'm writing down the obstacle sentences I tell myself: [list them – e.g., "it's not time yet," "let this finish first," "not at my age/in my position," "that job doesn't take people like me"]. For each sentence, apply three steps: (1) What might the real feeling underneath this sentence be – give me an honest guess. (2) Turn the sentence into a testable claim (like "If I apply to X, I'll definitely be rejected"). (3) Design a way to test that claim this week, at low cost. Don't flatter me; if you see a truly valid obstacle, say that clearly too – but separate "untried" from "impossible."*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Ask yourself one question today and write the answer down somewhere: "In which area of my life am I waiting right now for someone to come and make room for me?" Just write it. You'll take the step this week; today, your task is to name your waiting.

If You're Graduating

The graduate version of "I can't apply, I'm not in my final year" sounds like this: "They want three years of experience." "I'm not from that university." "That company doesn't hire people like me." Notice how often you write the rejection letter yourself, before anyone else has had the chance.

Your CV is not your story; it is a summary of it. Before any interview asks, write one paragraph for yourself: "In five years, what do I want people to know me for?" Whoever holds that paragraph holds the pen.

⑦ Motto

Don't say "no" to yourself; that answer is someone else's job.

CHAPTER 5
NOT PROVING, GROWING

Curiosity · *Can I see what I don't know and go after it?*

① The Scene
İzmir, fall 1988.

For many years I told no one about this scene.

First, let me introduce you to who I was in middle school, so you understand how big the shock was. I was "the girl who learns it all in class." I never took work home; I finished the topic in my head while it was still on the board. In exams, I was known for handing in my paper and leaving before everyone else. I had a system: Listen, understand, solve, leave. Until that day, my system hadn't broken down even once.

The first exam period at boarding school came. One of my classes was taught by one of the school's hardest teachers; I won't give the name. I went into the exam as usual: I had listened, I thought I understood, I would solve, I would leave.

The result came. It was a shocking grade.

I won't tell you the number; the number wasn't what mattered anyway. What mattered was what I went through as I read that paper: it spoke to me in a foreign language. This couldn't be my grade, because this was who I was:

"the successful girl." This paper was telling me I was someone else.

Then I raised my head and looked around, and that's where I learned the real lesson. The class was full of people like me. Everyone had been first somewhere. Everyone had arrived with the label of "the smartest kid" in their own city. The math was merciless: We could no longer all be first at the same time. This class would have a last place too. And whoever came last was probably coming last for the first time in their life.

In those days, I watched two kinds of people in the dormitory; at that age, I couldn't have named them this way, but today I see it very clearly.

The first kind were those trying to protect their label: the ones who hid their results, said, "I hadn't studied anyway," and avoided asking questions. Because asking a question meant admitting you didn't know, and not knowing was a betrayal of the "smart kid" label. Some chose the easy classes and stayed away from the risky ones. I understood them; one part of me wanted to do the same.

The second kind was less showy. The ones who, when their result was bad, took the paper and went to the teacher: "Where did I go wrong here?" The ones who asked each other questions in study hall, who could say out loud, "I don't know." At first, this looked to me almost like shamelessness: How could they say "I didn't understand" so easily?

Then, slowly, I noticed something: The second group's grades were improving. The first group's weren't, because protecting a label is a job in itself, leaving no time for learning.

One evening in study hall, with that paper in front of me, I decided. Instead of folding the paper and hiding it, I opened it and looked, line by line, at where I had thought what. The next day, for the first time in my life, I said to a teacher, "I didn't understand this part."

The sentence barely made it out of my throat. But it made it out.

> *Your scene: Remember the first day you did your best and still didn't get the result you wanted. Which sentence went through your mind that day: "So I'm not good enough for this," or "So I should try something else"?*

② The Truth Inside Me

In Chapter 1, I told you the deepest question I carried inside me as I got on the bus: "What if the tools I built for myself aren't enough among the project kids?" That night, in the dormitory, the question seemed to have its answer: It hadn't been enough, after all. I didn't belong here.

I felt shame. The silent kind no one sees, the kind that burns you from the inside. And I did one more thing, which is still not easy to admit: In the letter I wrote to my mother, I never mentioned that result. That week, too, my letters kept to their editorial policy: Bad news didn't go to print. Because the girl in my mother's mirror was still "the successful girl," and I couldn't bring myself to break that mirror. Every grade of mine was her proof; so what would my failure prove? This was my way anyway; I told you in Chapter 2: Problems were left to me, and I solved them. That week went the same way; only this time the problem I needed to solve wasn't a class; it was me.

Now, after all these years, I need to say one more thing about those letters, because I'm writing this book for a young person, and I don't want to teach them anything wrong.

It's easy to tell those letters as a story of strength: Look, a girl who solves her own troubles. But that's not the whole of it. Those letters were also a kind of loneliness, and it went on much longer than it should have. What would have happened if I had told my mother about that grade? She would probably have been upset, and then it would have passed. Maybe she would even have said the one sentence I needed that day. I closed off that possibility with my own hand. For years, part of what I thought was "being strong" was really not knowing how to ask for help.

So I'm writing it plainly: Hiding bad news doesn't count as one of the cornerstones. Early responsibility is precious, but carrying everything alone isn't responsibility; it's loneliness. Until I graduated, I could ask my mother and my aunt for help, but when big troubles came up, I always tried to handle them myself so that I wouldn't upset them. This carried over into my working life too: no matter how big the trouble, I tried to solve it myself, until a good role model taught me teamwork and how to ask for and give support. Don't be as late as I was; you don't have to shoulder every trouble. Finding a person you can tell when something goes badly is one of the conditions of the foundation we'll be talking about in the rest of the book.

That week, without realizing it, I faced one of the most important questions of my life: **Who was I successful for?** For myself, or for the mirrors? Did I love learning, or being "the girl who knows"? It turns out the two aren't the same

thing. It took me years to tell them apart, but it started with that folded paper.

③ The Principle: Not Proving, Growing

Here is the idea I want you to take from this chapter: **After every hard result, your mind offers you two questions, and which one you choose determines who you will become.**

The first question: "What does this result say about me?" This is the question of the proving mindset. A mind that asks this question treats every exam as a courtroom: The result is a verdict, you are the defendant, and your intelligence is on trial. A person who lives with this mindset doesn't take risks, because every risk could produce evidence against the label. They don't ask questions, because a question is a confession of ignorance. They run from what's hard, shine at what's easy, and worst of all: when they fail, they live it not as an event but as an identity. They don't say "My exam went badly"; they say "I'm not good enough."

The second question: "What is this result teaching me?" This is the question of the growth mindset. For a mind that asks this question, the result isn't a verdict but data, a sign showing where you went wrong. A bad result still hurts; no one can cancel that. The difference is in the sentence that comes after the pain.

So which question is right? The second, and this isn't a consolation; it's a fact: Intelligence isn't something given at birth that stays the same. One of the most beautiful sentences in neuroscience is this: **Neurons that fire together wire together**. Every problem you struggle to solve, every concept you say "I didn't understand" about and work

on again, builds real, physical connections in your brain. Struggling is the mind's sweat: In the moment, it feels like weakness, but it's actually proof that the muscle is working. So the sentence "I don't have a head for math" is an incomplete one. More accurately: "I haven't worked enough in that area yet."

"Yet." Put this word in your pocket; it looks light, but it's like a door. "I can't" ends; "I can't yet" goes on.

A growth mindset doesn't mean applauding every failure. It is certainly not a forced optimism that says, "Everything is a lesson, everything is wonderful." A bad result is bad; not reaching your goal hurts; some doors really do close. A growth mindset doesn't deny the pain; once the pain has done its work, it chooses which question goes on the table. Grieve, then open the paper.

A warning, especially for those who grew up with the "smart kid" label, which means all of us in that class: The most dangerous praise is "you're so smart." It sounds like a gift but hides a trap: the more your intelligence is praised, the more you feel you owe it proof; and a person with something to prove can't risk it. The child praised for effort runs toward difficulty; the child praised for intelligence runs away from it, because difficulty is the label's enemy. Know this and apply it to yourself: When you praise yourself, what are you praising? Your brilliance, or your effort? Which one you hold your mirror up to determines what you'll grow.

Let me be honest: The idea of a growth mindset has been tested hard in recent years; its effect turned out to be smaller than people thought, and it worked best for the

students who were struggling most. It isn't magic; it's a way of looking. But it's free, and you have nothing to lose.

What I've learned from that folded paper to today is this: Life has two occupations: proving yourself and growing yourself. Both use the same energy and take the same hours. But one polishes you where you stand; the other carries you somewhere else.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, keep a **Yet Notebook.** The rule is simple: Every time you catch yourself saying "I can't," "I'm no good at this," "I'm not that kind of person," write the sentence down exactly as it is. In the evening, add one word to the end of each sentence: "yet." Then one line underneath: What would be the smallest fifteen-minute practice in that area? At the end of the week, count: How many sentences did you catch? My guess: more than you think. The point of this experiment is to show you how many courtrooms your own inner voice sets up. A voice you notice is a voice you can manage.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

The Proving-or-Growing Audit

> *These are the goals I'm pursuing right now: [list them]. For each goal, ask me these questions in order and weigh my answers: "When you reach this goal, who is the first person you want to tell?", "Would you keep going even if no one would ever find out you reached this goal?", "With this goal, what scares you more: failing, or being seen to fail?" After my answers, make an honest distinction: Which of my goals are for growing, and which are for proving something to someone? Don't ask*

me to delete the proving goals; just make me see them – I make the decision.

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, ask one question you've been avoiding for a long time; in class, at work, at home, wherever it is: "I didn't understand this; could you explain it again?" It will barely make it out of your throat. Mine barely made it out, too. Let it out.

If You're Graduating

In your first months you will want to prove that you deserved the job. You will nod in meetings you didn't follow and say "of course" to things you have never done.

The person who hired you knew you didn't know. Hiding it is the only thing that will disappoint them. The new graduate who asks "Can you show me how you would do this?" in the first month learns in one year what the one who pretends learns in three.

⑦ Motto

You either prove or you grow.

FIRST STOP
CLOSING

Stop for a moment; let's go back to the bus.

Remember, we left a girl at the terminal. A suitcase in one hand, two voices inside her. Now look at her again: the same girl, but now she knows courage isn't waited for; it's decided. The ground shifts, the compass stays. Excitement is data. Saying "no" to yourself is doing someone else's job. And the result on the paper isn't a verdict; it's a lesson.

She didn't know any of this when she got on the bus. She learned all of it on the way. It will be the same for you; the list isn't memorized, it's lived.

Now a new road lies ahead for that girl: the schools are ending, the tables are beginning. Big buildings, crowded meetings, cities that don't speak her language. The suitcase at the terminal was small; the ones after it are heavier. But don't worry. The foundation to carry them is now in place.

And the crowd is coming now. At the second stop, we'll sit down at those tables. Come.

SECOND STOP
FINDING A SEAT AT THE TABLE



The second stop. That girl has grown up now, and in front of her are tables: meeting tables, negotiating tables, tables where even who gets to sit is an issue. At this stop I'll tell you what I learned at those tables: how value is created, how to get back up after you fall, how the helm is held in a storm. But don't forget the girl at the terminal; she'll always be coming with us. Because you'll see: the table changes, the threshold doesn't.

CHAPTER 6
DON'T WAIT TO BE NOTICED; CREATE VALUE

Action · *Can I stop waiting and take action?*

① The Scene
Frankfurt, December 2001.

Thirteen years after that bus in Antalya, I found myself in a completely different room. I joined Accenture, one of the world's largest management consulting firms, through its Germany office, but the place that really tested me was the project table in Frankfurt, where I was assigned.

At that table, I had three labels, and I had chosen none of them: I was the only woman on the division's management team, the only person who couldn't speak German, and the youngest person in the room. Together, all three put you in an invisible shop window: before you even open your mouth, your presence is a question mark.

A room like that makes you feel your limits right away. You don't get the jokes slipped in between sentences. I laughed at the jokes two seconds after everyone else did. After a while, I started calling this, to myself, my "delayed humor service." Half the conversations in the corridor are closed to you. That you are not "from here" is obvious before you even speak.

In a room like that, you have two paths in front of you. Either you go along with the system and become invisible: stay quiet, take up little space, and try to survive by fitting into the mold. This path looks safe, but it has a price: The more invisible you become, the less your contribution seems to count, because a contribution nobody notices is usually treated the same as a contribution that never existed. Or you stop treating your difference as an excuse and turn it into leverage: Being different is no longer a weight holding you back, but a signature that sets you apart.

I chose the second. But I'm not going to tell this as a romantic story of courage; it wasn't one. It was something much plainer and much more tiring: *I worked harder*. I went to meetings better prepared than anyone. I made up for my language disadvantage by knowing the field better than most people on the team. Where everyone else came in with fluent German, I came in with the language of numbers, analysis, and preparation, because that language was universal and nobody could ignore it.

There was also something at that table I told no one: the year I graduated, my father had retired, and supporting the household had fallen largely to me. From the outside this looks like a burden; for me it worked the other way. Because I didn't have the luxury of failing, I didn't have the luxury of waiting for anyone's permission either.

In consulting, no project came easy. Clients didn't roll out the red carpet for us; they expected more from us than from their own teams. Proving myself once wasn't enough there; I had to prove myself again every day. It was tiring. But I was at peace, because I had a belief, and that belief felt both right and noble to me: **Do good work, and the**

system takes care of the rest. Create value, and you'll be noticed sooner or later.

Four years had passed since that first winter in Frankfurt. When I entered the pool for promotion to senior manager, the picture was familiar again: *the youngest candidate, the only woman, the person who seemed "not quite a fit here."*

At the meeting where the decision was to be made, Robert Jung, one of the senior partners at the time, stood up. What he said stayed with me for years; as I remember it, it went like this:

"I can't say we understand exactly how Barış's mind works. It's clear she is different from us. But with that mind, she has shown again and again that she creates value on difficult projects, finishes them successfully, and gets results. That is why we need to promote her."

What surprised me most in that statement was its honesty, not its praise. Robert didn't claim to "understand" me; he didn't try to make me resemble him either. He put forward just one thing: This mind produces results.

It was no coincidence that Robert stood up that day. If I had stayed quiet and waited to be noticed, the person speaking on my behalf would have had nothing to stand on. The results I had produced were so far above average that they had built the ground on which he could defend me. *Hareket berekettir*, as the Turkish saying goes: movement brings abundance. It had come true once more. My belief had been confirmed: Create value, and the system sees you.

A few years later, partnership season came, and that belief broke in my hands.

By then, I was in the Türkiye office, but the partnership decision was made at the regional level, based on the regional quota. Another person like me was on the candidate list: similar performance, experience, and results. The role was a regional responsibility. There was one difference between us, one I had never cared about until that day: he was more visible. What he wrote got read. People talked about his ideas in the corridors. The people sitting at the decision table knew what he did.

I found out the result late Friday afternoon. A mass email announcement to the global team – and his name in it. The office had long since emptied; I was the only one left, staring at a screen. The news rang through the room, and I was the only one who heard it. I said nothing; there was no one to tell anyway. I shut down the computer, took my jacket, and went for a long walk.

Later, they told me the reason openly: I was very young; I could wait. A colleague eight or ten years older than me had been promoted.

In that moment something broke inside me – and at exactly the same moment, something became clear.

What broke was that belief. Because systems are not fair scales; they are noisy. Everyone thinks they do good work; everyone expects their contribution to be seen. In that noise, truly valuable work doesn't rise to the top on its own. If a quiet masterpiece and a loud mediocrity are in the same room, the loud one usually gets heard.

What became clear was this: **Visibility doesn't replace performance – but it carries it.** Doing good work is the engine; getting what you produce to the right people is the transmission that carries the engine's power to the wheels.

Without a transmission, the engine just spins. For years, I ran a very good engine without installing the transmission.

Was I angry that night? I was. But at first I aimed my anger at the wrong target: the system, the game, the rules. A few days later I got honest: Nobody had stolen anything from me. I had not made sure the value I created reached the people who needed to see it. I chose to see this not as an injustice but as a gap; I was responsible for that gap, and I was the one who would close it.

I didn't reach this honesty on my own. The leader I reported to at the time didn't leave me alone in the middle of my disappointment: He sat down, listened, and coached me so I wouldn't spend my anger in the wrong place. I didn't slam the door, react emotionally, or leave the company. I kept producing the same work at the same quality.

So what changed after that? I didn't start making noise. I didn't start marketing myself either; that path is fragile. What I did was plainer and harder: **I gave the work I produced an address.** An analysis I finished no longer just sat in a file; it went to the person who would use it. A problem I solved wasn't just solved; how it was solved got explained. I left silence behind, but what I said always stayed the same: results.

The next year I became a partner. This time the people at the table knew what I did.

Between the bus in Antalya and that meeting room in Frankfurt lay years, countries, and languages, but the issue was the same. In neither place had anyone set aside a seat for me. The order in Antalya said, "girls don't go on with school"; this room said, "this profile doesn't fit here." I gave both the same answer: I didn't wait for an invitation; I

created value, and this time I left an address for that value to go to.

Your scene: Remember a day when something you thought you deserved went to someone else; maybe you were told, "You're young, you can wait." Who had seen what you produced that day, and who hadn't? Did you choose to wait, or to be seen?

② The Truth Inside Me

After I lost that promotion, I was left with a question; I asked myself for years and never could answer it: Was it really visibility? Or was it that I was young, that I was a woman, that I was a stranger to the language of that room?

I never found out. This is the most tiring part of being "the only one": Behind every loss stand two explanations, and no one tells you which one is true. I chose the explanation I could hold in my hands, because if I had chosen the other, I would have had nothing left to do. Maybe that was a choice, but it was a choice that moved me forward. Even today I'm not sure; I only know which answer kept me at the table.

Loneliness doesn't always look dramatic either; I learned that there. Sometimes it is as quiet as walking out of a meeting and not knowing who to exchange two sentences with. Sometimes it is still feeling like a guest at a dinner that is ordinary for everyone else. In those years, I wasn't only translating my work; I was constantly translating myself: every sentence, every behavior, every silence.

People assume that in moments like these, what you want most is to be understood. For me, it wasn't that simple. More than being understood, I wanted the value I created

to be **undeniable**. Because I knew: In some rooms, they don't need to like you, and they don't need to resemble you either. But if they can't ignore the result you put on the table, it means you have built your own place.

③ The Principle: Value First – Then an Address

Being noticed is a result; but it doesn't come on its own.

Most people build the sequence backward: "First let me be noticed, first let them trust me, first let them give me a chance; then I'll show what I can do." Systems don't work that way. No one makes room for you before they see what you can do; and without room, you can't show it. There is only one key to this lock: creating, in the space you already have, value that no one can ignore. Small space, small value; that's fine. Value makes the space bigger; waiting doesn't.

This also has an inward side: self-confidence is tied to the same lock. People think self-confidence is a precondition: "If I believed in myself, I would do it." But self-confidence results from action; it feeds on evidence. In Chapter 1, I said courage comes after the decision; the whole chain is this: decision → action → result → confidence. The chain always flows in this direction.

But the lesson that took me years was not at the end of the chain; it was in the middle: **A result doesn't walk on its own feet.** Getting what you produce to the person who needs to see it is also your job. That is why my Frankfurt formula has four parts:

Find the universal language. Every setting has a local language: accent, connections, the right schools, the right jokes. In that language, you'll always be behind. But there

is also a universal language: results. A solved problem is a solved problem in every language. I laughed at German jokes two seconds late, but my numbers were second to no one's. I heard this lesson again a few years later, in a completely different place: a film-directing class. It is the first rule of screenwriting: *don't tell, show*. Don't say the character is brave; have them do something brave. The rule of working life is the same: Don't say you're good; show the result. Talk is a local language; results are universal. Find the universal language of your own room too: There, you have no accent.

Choose consistency over brilliance. One big flash catches the eye but leaves no trace. The memory of systems runs on consistency: keeping your word, sticking to the deadline, not letting quality slip. Lay one brick a week; in a year it becomes a wall.

Give your value an address. Let the work you do have a recipient. Get what you finish to the person who will benefit from it; explain how you solved the problem, and take the result to the person who is waiting for it. This is not marketing yourself. There is a thin but vital line here. Visibility without performance is the most fragile thing in the world: Once someone looks closely, it becomes clear there's nothing behind it, and the backlash is merciless. The point is not to be visible; **it is to make sure the real value you create reaches the people who need to see it**. If you have produced something truly valuable, keeping it from view isn't modesty; it is a kind of stinginess toward the people who could benefit from it.

Today this holds even more. People put one set of skills forward; employers pay for a completely different set. The

"safe" signals everyone writes don't set anyone apart because everyone has them. Giving an address means sending the right thing to the right place.

Turn your difference into your signature. Don't apologize for being different. Don't forget Robert's lesson: They don't need to understand you or resemble you; it's enough for them to see the results your different mind produces. Difference is a weight as long as it produces no results; the moment it starts producing results, it becomes a signature.

One more warning: Being busy is not the same as creating value. Rushing around a lot, sending lots of messages, talking in every meeting just to say something: These produce motion, not value. The test is simple: If you hadn't done that work, what would be missing? If the answer is "nothing," you have moved a lot, but the contribution of your work isn't showing yet.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, test **the preparation gap**: If you have a meeting, a class, a presentation, a match, any shared stage ahead of you, go there as the most prepared person in the room. Just once, and overdo it: Study the topic in advance, anticipate the questions, keep the numbers in your pocket. Then watch: What changed in the room? The looks that turned to you, the questions that came to you, the weight of your sentences? All my Frankfurt years were the long version of this experiment. Preparation is an advantage you can't see from the outside but whose effect you feel immediately, and it is entirely in your hands.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

Value Audit

> *Do a value audit with me. I'll describe the work I've done in the past month: [list what you did at school/at work/ on your team]. For each item, ask me two questions and weigh my answer: "If you hadn't done this, what would be missing?" and "Besides you, who saw or used the result of this?" Then split the list into two groups: real value (its absence would be felt) and busyness (there was motion, but no trace). Don't be afraid to upset me; clearly show the busyness group. Finally, one question: Next month, which problem in my setting that nobody has solved could I take ownership of to create the greatest value?*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, take one piece of work you've finished but nobody knows about and get it to a single person: the person who will benefit from it. Don't boast, don't present, don't market; just send it: "I did this; it might be useful to you." That's all installing the transmission is.

If You're Graduating

In your first job you will learn that good work is not seen on its own. It needs an address.

Keep a simple weekly note: what I finished and who it helped. When review time comes, you will have results to show, not adjectives. Giving your work an address is not self-promotion; it means getting the work to the person it serves.

One more thing. Behind every door I walked through, there was a person who held it open: a teacher, an aunt, a manager who stood up for me in a meeting I wasn't in. You will need such people, and they rarely appear on their own. Find the people whose work you admire, show them yours, and ask for one specific thing: a piece of advice, an introduction, fifteen minutes. Asking is not weakness; it is how doors get opened.

⑦ Motto

Results are the only language without an accent.

CHAPTER 7
THE ONLY WOMAN AT THE TABLE

Authenticity · *Can I stay myself in the crowd and next to the machine?*

① The Scene

I can't put a city and a year at the top of this scene. I did in every chapter before this one; here I can't.

Because this scene didn't happen once. It happened in Frankfurt, then in another country, then in another. In more than twenty-five countries, in different languages, at different tables, but always the same scene. So pinning it to a single day would be a lie; it wasn't a day, it was a season. A season that lasted years.

The scene opens like this: I'm at the meeting room door. Files in my hand, my preparation in my head. I open the door, and before I've even said "good morning," without even noticing, a counter inside me starts running: How many women are in the room?

Most of the time the answer was clear at the door: *one*. Me.

This number didn't change much over the years either. I was past forty when I joined the executive committee of Türk Telekom, an institution with a lineage dating back 180 years, as its first and only woman deputy general manager.

I didn't set up this counter; it set itself up. When you walk into a room where you are a minority, you first look for your own reflection. If you find even one, the room is a different room. If you don't, you put an invisible jacket on your shoulders: the jacket of representation. From that day on, at that table you are not only yourself. Whether you like it or not, you are a category.

There were small, almost funny sides to this: at conferences, for example, there was never a line for the women's restroom; that's where you saw the industry's gender statistics most clearly. But the big sides were not funny.

There is a story passed from ear to ear at tables; anyone who has lived it knows it. You take the floor, your sentence hangs in the room for a second, and the meeting moves on. Ten minutes later another voice, a deeper voice, repeats the same idea and the room suddenly comes alive: "Now that's a good idea." Right there, you are at a moment of decision: Do you say "I just said that," or don't you? If you say it, a label is ready: oversensitive. If you don't, you lose something else: your voice. The first time, you swallow it. The second time, you learn: You say that sentence. Calmly, smiling, but you say it. "Yes, I raised that point a moment ago too; now let me add this to it." The tone of voice doesn't file a lawsuit, but it corrects the minutes.

Here is one of mine; that scene will happen to you one day too, and on that day you choose what to do.

Istanbul, the top floor of an office tower, the senior management meeting room. I have a presentation in my hands, and its question is uncomfortable: Are we running the company's future on short-term economic targets, or on a long-term strategic vision? I put the numbers on the

table: data, not guesses. When I finished, the people at the table nodded. “Right,” they said. “Important.” Then, without anyone objecting, the topic was quietly shelved, and the meeting moved on to the next item.

This is the sneakiest version of that story: Your idea isn’t rejected. It’s approved – and forgotten. If they had objected, I would have argued; they approved, and left me nothing to argue with.

I still remember the sentence that went through my mind in that moment: *“They can pretend to listen to me and quietly put it off. But I won’t give up. If they throw me out the door, I’ll come back in through the window; I’ll explain this design again and again, and that program will start.”*

It started. But not at the first meeting, not with the first presentation. At some point after I had stopped counting how many times I had explained the same idea, at different tables, in different words. Protecting your voice sometimes isn’t saying a sentence once with courage; it’s saying the same sentence again while it seems no one is listening.

There is also a scale that only those who are “the only one” know: If you speak firmly, you’re “too ambitious”; if you speak softly, you’re “not strong enough.” The same behavior is “decisiveness” in another body; in you, it’s “a tone problem.” You learn to walk on that scale. Every day, every meeting, adjusting it again.

So what did I do at these tables? I didn’t shrink back. I didn’t deepen my voice; I didn’t tone down my laugh; as I translated myself into the language of those tables, I didn’t lose the original text. I created value and left the talking to the results.

That was what showed from the outside. But the real subject of this chapter is not the table; it's what goes on inside while you're at the table.

> *Your scene: Remember a moment when you walked into a room and counted yourself: the only young one, the only new one, the only different one. Did you speak at that table, stay silent, or sit there like part of the furniture?*

② The Truth Inside Me

In this book, every chapter has a "truth inside me" section. In this chapter, that section is the chapter itself.

The truth is this: What really wore me out at those tables wasn't the file in front of me; it was the courtroom inside me.

I mentioned the "what if it isn't enough?" question in Chapter 1. Now let me say the whole of it: At a table where you are "the only one," that question turns into something else. Because you aren't answering only for yourself. If I gave a bad presentation, it wasn't going to be "Barış had a bad day"; it was going to be "well, women." My bad day would become a statistic. A man's mistake is charged to him; the mistake of "the first" and "the only one" is charged to everyone who comes after. You walk into the meeting in that jacket: Nobody sees it, but you feel its weight with every step.

That feeling they call the impostor feeling (in the literature it goes by impostor syndrome: the feeling that "I got in here by mistake, and any minute now it'll come out") – I had it too. The question of the girl on the bus, "what if it isn't enough," changed clothes and came to those tables, too. For years, even in the rooms where I was most qualified, I

carried a voice inside me that waited, saying, "Any minute now someone will notice." I told no one; who would I have told? No one in the room was like me.

Then there is the sum of those years. From 2001 to 2008, I lived out of suitcases. First, while I was attached to the Germany office: almost every country in Europe, America, Brazil, China, Korea, Japan. The most intense was Shanghai: In 2004, ten of us went from Germany to China to turn a business line a chemicals group had sold off into a company that stood on its own two feet, within a year; the first step of a transformation that would spread across nine countries was a factory built from scratch. For a year I lived without knowing Chinese; I had the hotel write addresses in Chinese and showed the card to taxi drivers. I slept four hours a day, carried three phones, and shuttled back and forth between Tokyo and Seoul. That year taught me this: Even in a place where you don't know the language, command of the work, hard work, good intentions, and high motivation get you through the hardest tests. I'm not holding up the four hours of sleep as a model; what that pace cost comes in Chapter 11. Even when I came back to the Türkiye team, it didn't stop. Then Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan. Project after project, some months, three continents. I strained every moment to make room for myself in a completely different world, and at the time I couldn't see the price of that effort: I spent much of my life far from the people I love. Birthdays, holidays, ordinary Tuesday evenings. I'm writing this not as heroism, but as a bill. Every choice has a bill; most of the time you see it late, and sometimes you aren't the only one who pays it.

And do you know what the sneakiest danger was? Not becoming invisible; we talked about that in Chapter 6. I knew that trap. Sneakier still: imitation. At some point, something whispers in your ear: "If you want to belong at this table, look like this table." Speak more harshly, laugh at their jokes, fit into their mold. Maybe you'll be accepted, but the one accepted won't be you; it will be someone you're imitating. And one day you look in the mirror: You belong to the table, but you don't belong to yourself. I remember the days I came close to that line. I turned back because, somewhere inside me, I knew this: No table I might win after losing my own voice would be worth that loss.

Character, it turns out, is built most in the rooms where you feel most like a stranger, when no one is watching.

③ The Principle: Protect Your Voice

The idea I want you to take from this chapter is this: **You don't have to look like the table to belong at it. Belonging is built through contribution, not imitation.**

For a long time, I didn't know where I had found this stone; then I found it in my high school yearbook. My classmates described sixteen-year-old me in two sentences: "She has claimed that women are superior and has become the volunteer lawyer for our girls," and, underlined, "Barış's voice percentage is quite high." My voice, it turns out, had been put in place long before I gave it a name. You have a yearbook too; look at how your friends wrote about you. Your stones are lying there, still without names.

First, let's settle accounts with the impostor feeling, because it is this principle's chief enemy. Know three things:

First: That feeling is almost universal, and it clings most to the best. Because that feeling is actually evidence of something: that the rooms you walk into are bigger than your comfort zone. Few people have never felt it.

Second: A feeling is not data. You know this from Chapter 1: The feeling comes to you; you check the truth. "I don't belong here" is a feeling; how you got here is a fact. When the feeling presses in, count the facts: How did you get to this table? Through exams, effort, results. Nobody handed you a lottery ticket. While the courtroom inside you is judging you, keep your evidence file ready.

Third: There's no need to wait for that feeling to pass. You move forward by speaking while it's still there. Just as courage walks side by side with fear, contribution walks side by side with the impostor feeling.

Now let's come to belonging. At a table where you are "the only one," you are sold two fake solutions. One is invisibility: Shrink, fit in, stay in the shadows. The other is imitation: Look like them, fit the mold, become one of them. Both promise the same thing (safety), and both send the same bill: Your body stays at the table; you don't.

The third path is harder, but it is the only real one: building belonging by changing the question. The question "Do I belong at this table?" always puts you in the defendant's chair. Turn the question around: **"Why is this table incomplete without me?"** This isn't arrogance; it's a job description. If no one else at that table sees what you see (and if you're different, usually no one does), your silence means the table stays blind. Remember Robert Jung's lesson: Your different mind is the room's ability to see. Then your voice isn't only a right; it is also a responsibility.

Protecting your voice also has small, learnable crafts; they aren't fancy, but they work. Speak once within the first five minutes. You don't have to deliver content; even a question that shows you're engaged will do. If your voice is heard early, the room counts you among the "influential" people, and what follows gets easier. It has two limits: There will also be meetings where you can't speak in the first five minutes; then speak when the moment comes. And don't jump in on everything; otherwise, you're not making your voice heard, you're creating the image of a loudmouth. Own your idea; when someone steals it, stay calm, but don't stay silent. Correct the minutes, smiling. Come prepared. The universal language from Chapter 6 applies here too: Even if you have an accent, the success of your numbers is plain to see; then nobody openly mocks your accent or removes you from the table.

This chapter is not a chapter written for women. Everyone, at some point in their life, is "the only one" at a table: the only young one, the only foreigner, the only one from a different school, the only one who thinks differently. I lived "the only foreigner" too: I worked in Shanghai for a year; in an office of two hundred people, I was the only one who didn't know Chinese. There, too, I saw the same thing: The only language without an accent was results, and the way to stay at the table without looking like the table was the same in every country. When that day comes, remember this chapter.

And these lines are for those who are not "the only one" at the table where they sit: You will most likely sit at those tables as part of the majority. Then the real test in this chapter will be yours. Look around the room and

count, this time not for yourself but for someone else: Whose voice isn't being heard? Whose idea only gains value when it is repeated in another voice? Make room for that person yourself. "What do you think?" is the biggest sentence a person with power at a table can say. For years I waited for that sentence; sometimes it came, most of the time it didn't. I never forgot the days it came. Be the day that sentence comes.

I tried to be that day. When hiring new graduates, I always watched the balance between women and men. At Mudo, I seated very successful women at the deputy general manager table; at the AI startup factory, more than half of my team were women. This wasn't a quota; it was my choice, because I believe diversity is richness: Those tables had been set up one way for years. I did the same work off the table, too; I supported women's associations (Yanındayız, TurkishWIN, KAGİDER, YenidenBiz), some of them while they were still being founded, and I volunteered in mentoring programs for women. This is the best part of being "the only one": Once you sit at the table, you also get a say in who sits next to you.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, try **the first-five-minutes rule**: In every shared setting you walk into (a class, a meeting, a practice, the family dinner table), make your voice heard at least once within the first five minutes. An idea, a question, a joke; the content is up to you, the time is fixed. Do it once, at the right moment, without jumping in on everything or talking nonsense. At the end of the week, compare: Between the settings where you spoke early and the ones where you didn't speak at all, how did the way you felt change?

My observation is this: Once you've spoken at the start of a meeting, taking the floor later gets easier.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

Voice Rehearsal

> *Run a meeting simulation with me. Scenario: [describe an upcoming meeting/class/presentation setting and the difficulty you face there – e.g., "I get interrupted," "my idea gets accepted when someone else repeats it," "I don't dare to speak"]. You will play different people at the table in turn; you will create difficult moments – someone who interrupts me, someone who claims my idea, a flow that ignores me. Each time, you will stop, and I will write my answer. Evaluate my answer by two criteria: "Did I make my voice heard?" and "Did I protect the relationship?" Have me repeat the scene until I meet both conditions together. Rule: When I write "stop," drop the role and speak in your own voice.*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, at a table, whatever table it is, say one of these two sentences: If your idea got accepted in someone else's voice, "I said that a moment ago; let me take it further like this." If someone else's voice isn't being heard, "What do you think?" Both take ten seconds. Both change the balance of a table.

If You're Graduating

As a new graduate you will often be the youngest person at the table; sometimes the only one from your school, your city or your background.

Speak once, early in the meeting; after that, it gets easier to speak again. Walk in with one question or one observation prepared. Your fresh eyes are the value you bring. The table already knows what it knows; it does not yet know what you see.

⑦ **Motto**

You don't have to look like the table to belong at it.

CHAPTER 8
FALL, GET UP, KEEP GOING

Action · *Can I stop waiting and take action?*

① The Scene
Istanbul, 2012.

I am in a meeting room, and two voices are talking inside me. You know these voices; they got on the bus with me. Over the years they never fell silent; only their subjects changed.

The offer on the table was this: to become CEO of Mudo. To an outsider, a brilliant career step. To me, from the inside, it was something else entirely: leaving sixteen years of consulting life, a world with clear rules, high prestige, and a clear path for advancement, and stepping into a more uncertain, more personal, harsher field. It wasn't that I didn't know retail; as a consultant I had worked on eight or ten large retail transformation projects in different countries. What I didn't know was the other side of the table: not the side that gives advice, but the side that opens the shop every morning. One hundred nineteen stores in twenty-six cities, more than two thousand four hundred people, and responsibility for all of them resting on one signature. The shadow of strong founder personalities. The very middle

of family-company dynamics. And a transition no one expected of me.

The first voice was very familiar: "Don't do this. This isn't the world you know. Giving advice and holding the helm are not the same job. You have a lot to lose."

The second voice was calmer but deeper: "Do it precisely for that reason. Because real growth doesn't come from getting a little better on ground you already master; it comes from carrying a responsibility on a scale that will push you."

Fear was right. Passion was more right. I accepted.

But I didn't give that "yes" at that table alone. That evening I went home and talked with Burak: my life partner, my soulmate; for years we have been running toward the same goal. "If you want this job, we'll figure out the rest together," he said. Behind every act of courage you will read about in this book, there is a sentence no one sees; this is the one behind mine.

The part of this story that usually goes untold is what comes *after*. Because the movie of decisions like this always ends in the same place: the hero says "yes," the music swells. In real life, the moment you say "yes," the music doesn't swell; the work begins.

In the first hundred days, we built a plan: performance system, supply chain, profitability, customer, talent. We opened a transformation office; in the first eighteen months, we launched fifty projects. It looks impressive on paper, doesn't it? Everything looks impressive on paper.

In the field, though, something else stood out: *resistance*. Moving a family company into a corporate structure

is like rearranging someone's home furniture while the people who live in it are still there. Every armchair has a memory, and every memory has an owner. The founder's intuition and my systems mind met at the same table every day. Some decisions took us months to make. Some projects hit a wall. Some months the numbers wouldn't smile on us.

After two full years, revenues had risen 33 percent. A nice number. But I am going to tell you all of it, because that is what we agreed on in this book. All of it is less shiny than that number.

Profitability was below expectations. The furniture business went from loss to profit, but apparel, the company's largest arm, went from profit to loss while I was there. We were a year behind the program. Seventeen of the twenty-five top management seats changed hands in two years; together with my bosses, we made the decisions the transformation required and took the necessary steps. The company also bore the bill for that change. We had big successes, and I had mistakes; the details are written in the Harvard case I will tell you about shortly. A critical department head I hired first didn't last a year; everyone needed to see that I measured the person I brought in by the same yardstick. I brought people who didn't know retail into top management; some did legendary work, and we had to replace others. We also got the order wrong: we restructured the support functions (human resources, information technology) first, and the core business after. If it were today, we would do it the other way around; we said this in the case presentations, too. Later, the actions we took made the entire operation profitable in the years that followed.

I can't tell you in numbers what the fall felt like; one of those tables can.

Mecidiyeköy, a business district in Istanbul, headquarters, the large management meeting room. In front of me is a list of stores that had lost money for years but still had a place in the company's history. Next to it, analytical performance reports: how much each store had lost and for how many years, page after page. This is my first hard decision. I put the list on the table.

The founder, Mustafa Bey, looked at the table printout, nodded, and began to speak. I won't repeat what he said word for word; years have passed, and I don't have a record of that conversation. But I know well what he was telling me, because over the next four years we had the same argument at the same table many times, and the hardest subject of the transformation was always this: closing stores. For me, a store was a row in my table. For him, a store was a piece of fifty years; while I was there, Mudo was celebrating its fiftieth year. Every store in those fifty years was built on relationships: handshake agreements with the property owner, shopkeepers he had known for years, and a street whose opening day he remembered. Years later, in an interview, he said that when the first Bodrum store was being let go, he couldn't bear it and had a farewell video made for it. I don't know of anything that shows better what those stores were to him. He was a man who called both the company and his son "my child"; I was telling him one of his children was losing money.

The room went quiet. In that moment, I understood that I would never be able to convince him on this subject. Not because of a number, but because of a way of seeing.

Because his way of seeing was right too. I was looking at numbers; he was looking at his life. His memory held fifty years of opening days, first customers, debts, victories. We were looking at the same thing at the same table and seeing two different things: I saw the number; he saw the relationship, the legacy, and the memory. Today I can also say this: those arguments were not only emotional. Some stores had a value that didn't show up in the table: the value of a relationship, of a forty-year-old name on a street. My table didn't have that column.

A single sentence went through my mind, and I still remember it word for word: *"If I can't build a bridge over this fault line between the founder's intuition and the logic of the numbers, the transformation will collapse before it even begins."*

That list had rows, but under every row stood a team. It was people, not numbers, who paid the cost of that decision. We did everything we could to ease the transitions; I can't claim it was enough.

I didn't leave that meeting with a decision. I left with a question. And that question is the subject of the next chapter.

From the outside, it was a success story; from the inside, it was an exhausting climb with ups and downs, with some nights ending in self-questioning.

This story also ends the same way every year. That transformation became a case at Harvard Business School, and every year, in front of a class of a hundred people, my decisions are judged again. The class opens with this question: "If you were her, would you leave a safe sixteen-year consulting career and take this risk?" Then the students decide in my place, critique what I did, and at the end of class they vote: "Out of ten, what score would you give

Barış?" And I sit in the back row and listen. For ten years, I have been invited to that class every year, even during the pandemic, on a screen; at the end of class, I answer the students' questions. The first year was hard; then I understood that this is exactly what I said in Chapter 5: a result is not a verdict; it is data. Every year, a new class looks at the same fall and learns something different. So do I.

In 2015, the case writers had asked me the same question; my answer is on record. For the process, I gave myself a 9 or 10. Doing business at the same table with those two strong personalities was no small thing. For the numbers, I said, "barely a pass." Both were true for that day; the numbers improved in the years that followed; if they asked me for the process score today, I would take off a point, because I had gotten the order wrong.

> *Your scene: Remember a table where you were sure you were right and couldn't convince the person across from you. What did they see that you didn't? What did you do in the end: did you push it through, or did you find a way?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Do you know what the hardest part is? Not falling. Being watched while you fall.

In consulting, when you make a mistake, it stays within a project. As CEO, your mistake becomes a headline inside and outside the company. I was the one who made "the transition no one expected"; if I were wrong, I wouldn't be the only one. The sentences "well, she came from outside" and "well, she wasn't a retailer" were waiting, ready. The jacket of representation from Chapter 7 was on my shoulders here too; only the fabric had changed.

Some evenings, on the way home, that question circled in my head: "What if the first voice is right?" I had left my safe world with my own hands; there was no return ticket. Struggling inside a hardship you chose yourself is a strange kind of loneliness. You can't complain, because you asked for it.

I learned something in that period and have carried it with me: questioning and regretting are not the same. I questioned a lot; I never regretted. Questioning shows your mind is working; lasting regret is what tells you the direction is wrong. When you confuse the two, every hard night will tell you, "give up."

③ The Principle: Falling Is an Accident; Not Getting Up Is a Decision

The fall is often not your choice; but most of what happens after the fall is your choice, including when, and from whom, you ask for help.

First, let's debunk this myth: that successful people fall less. The opposite is true. Successful people often fall more, because they try more. A person who has never fallen has either never walked or has always walked on flat ground.

So what happens when you fall? Two things at once: a piece of data is born, and a moment of decision opens.

The data is this: this road, in this form, didn't work. That is valuable information. Remember from Chapter 5: a result is not a verdict; it is data. The fall doesn't tell you who you are; it tells you what didn't work.

A man said this long before me, in a place so heavy it can't be compared to mine. In the book he wrote after surviving the concentration camp, Viktor Frankl describes this:

everything can be taken from a person except one thing: the freedom to choose how to respond to what happens. Hardship does not determine your fate; your response to hardship does. Let's not skip something else Frankl wrote: who survived was largely decided by luck, not virtue. He's not saying, "the right attitude will save you"; he's saying, "even when everything is taken from you, there is one thing left in your hands." The scale can't be compared; the lesson holds on a small scale too.

I have a shorter version; it came out of my mouth in an interview years ago: "I'm a girl from the Black Sea; where hope ends, my stubbornness begins." This may be the most useful inheritance my father's Black Sea coast left me.

The decision is this: what are you going to do now? Here, the difference between words sets the direction of a life. You need to tell three of them apart:

Stopping: taking a breath, dressing the wound, looking at the map again. Stopping is legitimate; in fact, it is necessary. A decision to continue made with a tired head is just as dangerous as a decision to quit made with a tired head.

Changing routes: keeping the direction and changing the route. At Mudo, we did this again and again: when a project didn't work, we didn't drop the goal; we changed the method. That isn't called giving up; it's called learning. As I said in Chapter 3: some doors close, curiosity finds a corridor. Persistence lies in the direction, not the road.

Giving up: letting go of the direction. Sometimes this is also the right decision; let's be honest: not every mountain is meant to be climbed, and not every road is your road. But there is only one legitimate reason to give up: being convinced, with your mind, that the direction is

wrong. One day's tiredness is not a reason; tiredness that lasts for months, though, is data; Chapter 11 comes back to what that pace costs. Shame is not a reason. "Everyone saw" is never a reason.

Also tell giving up apart from leaving. Ask yourself three questions: Am I going through the natural difficulty of learning, or am I staying in an environment that harms me? Could the effort I'm putting in pay off one day, or will this environment never give that return? Have I started sacrificing my health, my relationships or my principles? If you say "yes" to the third, this is not giving up; it's called leaving, and leaving is also a decision, not an escape. I learned this late; at some tables I stayed longer than I should have.

The problem is that right after a fall, these three look alike. When you're hurting, "I'm giving up" comes out in the same tone as "I'm stopping." That's why, over the years, I set myself a rule: the first twenty-four hours after a fall are not decision hours. In those hours, only two things get done: the wound is dressed, and data is gathered. The decision is left for the morning, sometimes for the next week. Almost all of the worst decisions I've made were ones I made while I was hurting.

Then there is the matter of "just keep going." There is a man, the founder of a sneaker brand, who loves this sentence very much; this stubbornness drips from every page of his book. The sentence is true, but it is often misunderstood. "Just keep going" doesn't mean "keep doing the same thing the same way"; that is banging your head against the wall. The right reading is this: stay in the game. Think about the score, but don't leave the match. Learn something from every fall, pick that lesson up off the ground as

you get up, and keep going – by another route if you have to, but in the same direction.

Falling and getting back up is also a stone laid in the foundation. Remember the rule I gave in Chapter 2: resilience is not something you are born with; with every shock you get through, you get a little stronger, one more stone is laid in the foundation, and the foundation settles as it carries the load. The same rule holds here: each time, you get better at it. The first time you get up is the hardest; after my first bad grade at boarding school, even though I floundered, I was able to get up and keep going; after my first rejection at the basketball tryouts, too, I had gotten up and kept on, working to learn more; and in hard management roles, after hitting a wall and falling flat on my face, I got up. Every experience makes the next one easier. Because after a certain point your body memorizes it: we fell, yes. We'll get up, I know. The procedure is clear.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, set up the **twenty-four-hour rule** and apply it at the first opportunity: when you get a bad result (a bad grade, a rejection, a lost game, a plan that went wrong), make no big decision about it for twenty-four hours. Do only two things: take good care of yourself, and pour the data onto a single page (what happened, what didn't work, what I learned). After twenty-four hours, look at the paper and read the three options: stop, change routes, let go of the direction. Which one looks more reasonable now? The difference between yesterday's inclination and today's assessment is the distance the emotion has to travel before it steps back from the decision.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

The Fall Sorter

Something went badly for me, and I need to decide what to do: [describe the situation – what you tried, what happened, how you feel right now]. Help me sort through three possibilities: Is this a "stop and regroup" situation, a "same direction, different route" situation, or really a "this direction turned out not to be mine" situation? Ask me, in this order: "Why did you start toward this goal – is that reason still valid?" "Is what isn't working the direction or the method?" "Are your emotions dictating this decision right now, or your mind?" Don't push me in any direction; list the evidence for each of the three possibilities separately and leave the decision to me.

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, pick up something you left half-done and continue it for twenty minutes from where you left off. You don't have to finish it; just get back into the game. The first step of getting up comes through contact, not victory.

If You're Graduating

The first fall for most graduates is a pile of rejections: applications with no reply, interviews that end with "we went with another candidate." A "no" from a company is a judgment about one role on one date, not a verdict on you.

Keep a list with three columns: where I applied, what I heard back, what I learned. Falling is hearing "no." Not getting up is when you stop applying.

⑦ Motto

Falling is an accident; not getting up is a decision.

CHAPTER 9
FROM INTUITION TO SYSTEM

Resilience · *Can I stay on my feet while the ground shifts?*

People do not decide their futures; they decide their habits, and their habits decide their futures. — attributed to F. M. Alexander

① The Scene
Mudo, meeting room, 2014.

A long table. On it sit the products for the coming season: fabric swatches, color cards, and samples. At one end of the table sits a master who has done this work for years and carries the institution's commercial intuition almost single-handedly.

A product is handed over. The master takes it, touches the fabric, looks for a moment, and says one short sentence: "This one will sell." Or: "This one won't."

No reasoning. Even if asked, none could be given, because the reasoning isn't a spreadsheet; it's a feeling distilled over thirty years. The most striking part: most of the time it turns out to be right. Everyone in the room knows this; that's why no one objects. The decision is made from that end of the table; the rest is execution.

At first, this fascinated me. It really was something rare: a wisdom that couldn't be put into words, settled inside

someone who had done the same work with the same care for years. It's easy to belittle this, but it's wrong; that intuition was real. Behind it was a memory of thousands of decisions, thousands of mistakes, thousands of times touching the field.

But what fascinated me also unsettled me. A question dropped into my mind and never left: **What happens if this person isn't at this table tomorrow?**

The answer was simple and frightening: the intuition would walk out of the room too. The institution's most valuable asset was a feeling that had never been written down, never been handed to anyone, and lived in the head of a single person. The whole big company was living as a tenant in one person's genius; it didn't own what it knew.

Let me tell you what we did, because a small-scale version of what we did will be useful to you every day too.

First, we got the intuition to talk. We didn't say, "Let's stop deciding by feel and look at the numbers." That would have been throwing away what was valuable. I sat down at that table and started asking: "When you say this product will sell, what exactly are you seeing?" The first answer was always the same: "I don't know, I just see it." That was normal; real mastery is often wordless: the person who knows knows what they know but can't explain how they know it. So I changed the question: "What's the difference between this product and that one from last year?" When we turned an abstract judgment into a concrete comparison, the intuition began to talk. Real signals came out from underneath: the drape of the fabric, a cut that works with a certain customer, the psychological threshold of a price, a color starting to show up on the street that season.

Then we tested the intuition. We compared each signal with past sales. The result: most of the intuition was surprisingly accurate, but a small and critical part of it was now wrong. Because the customer had changed; the intuition hadn't. This is where the most delicate moment came: showing someone that part of their thirty-year intuition is wrong is a human job, not a technical one. If we had used the data like a weapon and said, "Look, you're wrong," we would have lost both the intuition and the person carrying it. We made the data a mirror: "Most of your intuition is gold. Let's update the small remaining part together so the gold keeps its value."

Then we handed it over. "Will sell/won't sell" was no longer one person's snap judgment; it became a decision ritual everyone followed using the same framework: customer fit, price threshold, past pattern, season signal, and yes, intuition. Note: intuition was not thrown out of the framework; it was put inside the framework as one line item. The result was striking: now a young team member in that room could also contribute to the decision, without the thirty years, but using a framework distilled from thirty years.

And the best part: the owner of the intuition wasn't harmed by this. His job was no longer to approve every product one by one, but to feed the framework and to act as a referee in the hard cases. He did less and created more value.

> *Your scene: Is there something you do well but can't explain how you do it? And a decision you made in a hurry and regretted? What lesson did you take from each; did you turn that lesson into a rule?*

② The Truth Inside Me

This story is always told as a victory for the system; let me tell you about my fear too.

As I sat at that table with my questions, there was an unease inside me: what if I break it? There are tasks that are like pulling off a butterfly's wings to understand it; once you pull them off, you no longer have a butterfly in your hand. As I pushed a thirty-year intuition into words, I felt the same risk: what if, with these questions, I scare it off, mechanize it, or kill that lovely instinct?

There was also this: in that room I was "the systems person who came from outside." Every question of mine, whether I wanted it to or not, carried an implication: "We don't trust your mind on its own." The truly hard part of the work wasn't the spreadsheets; it was looking that person in the eye and making him feel respected, not disrespected: "Your mind is so valuable that I'm not willing to let it disappear along with you." The spreadsheets were easy; winning a heart was hard.

Some days I grew impatient, too. Building a system is slow; deciding by intuition is fast. Some days it would have been easy to say, "Never mind, let the master say it; let's move on." The shortcut always looks tempting, until you see where it locks you in.

One day, that lock cost me dearly. Not at Mudo; years later, at another table, but the same lock of the same shortcut. Most of the falls you've read about so far came to me from outside. This one came to me from myself.

There was a position I had to fill fast. In front of me was a candidate who looked flawless: a brilliant résumé, a

reference from someone I trusted, and answers that landed exactly right to every question. Even though I knew decisions about people follow a system too, I skipped my own that day. I didn't follow up on the reference. I didn't ask people who had worked with this person, especially those who had worked under them. I didn't ask for concrete examples from real experience; I didn't say, "Tell me about this"; I asked, "How would you do this?" I took interview performance as proof of on-the-job performance. But an interview is a stage, and some people are very good on exactly that stage.

I was wrong. And in a way that didn't stay limited to one person. Someone who put winning ahead of everything, placed in the middle of a team, tore that team apart. People stopped trusting each other. People who worked well started spending their energy protecting themselves, not on the work. I didn't just choose the wrong person; I failed to match the speed I showed in choosing with the speed I showed in correcting. Admitting the mistake meant judging my own decision, and a person argues hardest for their own decision, like a defense lawyer.

The team paid the real price. I'm still uncomfortable writing this; I'm glad I am.

After that day, I set two rules for myself and never broke them again. First: I don't take references from the people the candidate gives me; with the candidate's knowledge, I find someone through my own network who really worked with that person, preferably someone who worked under them, and I ask them. The reference the candidate chooses is the candidate's stage; the reference I find is their kitchen. Second: no matter how urgent the position, I am never the

only one who sees the candidate; at least one other person on the team conducts a separate interview, and I decide only after that. Both rules cost me a day each. I know now that one day is cheaper than losing a team.

I learned two things from this, and I leave both to you. The first: **Speed does not replace a system. Least of all in decisions about people.** If you're wrong about a product decision, you lose a season; if you're wrong about a people decision, you lose a team's trust, and trust is the slowest thing in this world to repair. The second: carrying a wrong decision is always more expensive than reversing it. The day you realize a decision has turned out badly is more important than the day you made it, because on the first day you were only wrong; on the second day you have chosen.

③ The Principle: The System You Build on a Good Day Carries Your Bad Day

Make what works repeatable; a goal is an intention, a system is a habit, and in the long run the habit wins.

First let's make this distinction: a goal and a system are not the same thing. "Passing the exam" is a goal; "solving problems for twenty-five minutes every morning" is a system. "Getting fit" is a goal; "three workouts a week, my bag packed the night before" is a system. The goal gives you the direction; it's necessary, it is the compass from Chapter 2. But what carries the day is the system.

Why? Because a goal leans on motivation, and motivation is like the weather: clear some days, cloudy others. The beauty of a system is this: it doesn't ask for motivation. It works even on your bad day, your tired day, your "I really don't feel like it" day; the decision is already made, so

you don't have to make it again every day. The system you build on a good day carries you through a bad day. A person without a system has to convince themselves all over again every day; that is the most exhausting job in the world.

Now, here is the part of the Mudo story that applies to you. Like that master, you have things inside you where you'd say, "I just see it": things you do well without knowing how. Maybe the way you study for exams, maybe how you get along with people, maybe how you read positions in a game. These are your intuition capital, and right now, like that master's intuition, they are unwritten. The three moves from Mudo, plus a fourth Mudo taught me later, apply to you too:

Get it to talk: On the evening of a day that went well, ask: What exactly did I do today? In those three hours when I worked well, what was different: when, where, and in what order did I work? Where was my phone? "I don't know, it just happened" is the first answer; break through it with a comparison question: "What was the difference between this session that went well and yesterday's that went badly?"

Test it: Test the signal that comes out. "I work better in the morning" is a hypothesis; try one week of mornings and one week of evenings, and look at the result. Watch out for your own rote beliefs, too: "I focus better with music" is sometimes a real signal and sometimes just a habit defending itself. Make the data a mirror against yourself as well.

Hand it over to yourself: Turn the pattern that works into a routine that requires no decision. "Pack the bag every night before bed, be at the desk at eight in the morning, the first twenty-five minutes without the phone": this is

your framework. Tomorrow's you follows the system today's you built; it doesn't negotiate from scratch every morning. Add one more thing here: the scarcest resource of your era isn't only time but also attention, that is, focus. Your day is broken up by notifications, every screen compares you with someone else, and every week a new tool comes out that you're supposed to keep up with. Let your system tell you not only what to do but also what not to look at: which hours you don't check your phone, which news you don't read, which new tool you don't have to try this month, because it has nothing to do with you. A person who tries to catch every opportunity can't stay with any of them. Being able to stay with one subject for a long time is a competence in its own right in this era; perhaps the most precious one.

Keep it alive: A system's sneakiest disease is rigidity. One day, the sentence "the framework says so" replaces "this is what I think." It happened at Mudo, and it will happen to you. The antidote: every so often, deliberately raise the thing that doesn't fit the system. Was there a day when the system didn't work? That day isn't a mistake; it's a gold mine: the first sign of a new signal the system doesn't see. A system is a living learning loop: intuition catches something new, the system tests it, and if it's accurate, adds it to itself.

There is also an area where a system will help you most, but which comes to mind least: **your decisions about people**. Whom you do a project with, whom you take onto your team, whom you keep close. At your scale, the version of the mistake I described above is this: deciding "this is a good person" or "this one can do the job" based

on the first impression someone leaves on you. A first impression is a piece of data; it isn't the only data. The system you can build for yourself here is very simple: **Ask the question about the past, not the future**. The answer to "What would you do in a difficult situation?" measures imagination; the answer to "Tell me what you did in a difficult situation" measures behavior. If you can, find a second source too: ask someone who has worked with that person before. People are most themselves not around someone who wants something from them, but around someone who doesn't need them.

The last and most important warning: the purpose of a system is to free you from routine. A system takes the load of routine decisions so that your mind is left for its real work: seeing what is new, being curious, creating. The owner of the intuition at Mudo didn't shrink when the framework was built; he went back to his real work. You don't shrink either when you hand your morning routine over to a system; you start the day with a mind freed from having to negotiate with yourself every morning.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, build one system, but without a goal; you already have the direction. Pick one area of your life and define only the repeatable behavior: "Ten pages every night before bed," "twenty-five minutes at the same time every morning," "three lines of notes after every practice." Don't set a goal; don't measure the outcome, just mark whether the system ran: did it / didn't do it. At the end of seven days, count. If it's five or more, your system works, and you can grow it. If it's less, the system was too big; shrink it, not your morale. Let me give you an example, for attention:

this week, every day, give one uninterrupted hour to a single task you choose; the phone in another room. Each day, count two things: how many times you were interrupted, and what you had in hand at the end of the hour. On Friday, look at the two together. The day you see where your attention goes is the day you start taking it back.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

The Rigidity Checkup

> *Here are the routines and habits I've been following for a long time: [your work routine, your routines, the things you say "I always do it this way" about]. For each one, ask me three questions: "When was this routine last really questioned?" "Are the conditions from the day it was set up still valid?" "Is there a sign that doesn't fit this routine but that you've been ignoring?" At the end, give me an honest report: which ones are still a living system, and which have hardened into a rulebook? For the ones that have hardened, suggest one small update experiment each.*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, turn one of your goal sentences into a system sentence and write it down: instead of "My goal is X," "My system: every [day/trigger], [small behavior]." One sentence. Tomorrow, that sentence will start carrying you.

If You're Graduating

In interviews, you will be on the other side of the rule in this chapter. They won't ask what you would do; they will ask, "Tell me about a time you…" Prepare three real stories

before you go: a time you were wrong, a time you finished something hard, a time you worked with someone difficult.

And build your first work system in a good week: a list of open items, one fixed hour a week for learning, one fixed hour for planning. That system will carry your first bad week.

⑦ Motto

The system you build on a good day carries your bad day.

CHAPTER 10
HOLDING THE HELM IN A STORM

Resilience · *Can I stay on my feet while the ground shifts?*

① The Scene
Boston, March 12, 2020.

I was in a classroom at Harvard Business School, talking with MBA students about the Mudo case, as I had done before. The next day, the professor wrote to me: Harvard had decided to move all its courses online, and ours had been the last classroom discussion of the year. I flew home to Istanbul. Within days, the storm I am about to tell you about had begun.

Istanbul, March 2020.

One morning everything changed.

I don't mean that figuratively. There was a day on the calendar; before that day, the world was one thing; after that day, it was something else. I'm talking about the first days of the pandemic; days you remember too, but perhaps never saw from inside a country's communications backbone.

At the time, I was responsible for strategy, planning, and digital at Türk Telekom. Think about this: A country moved home within a week. Schools moved home, offices moved home, and everything from hospital appointments

to grocery orders suddenly ran on one thing: *connection*. Our job was to keep that connection standing while millions of people were saying at the same time, "Let my life go on through the internet."

In the early days, we saw this: A system that stayed technically up wasn't enough. It wasn't only the traffic that was changing; people's behavior, priorities, and expectations were changing just as fast. Five-year strategies, quarterly targets, carefully built roadmaps: All of them became void one morning. The importance of digital had been growing for years; that week, it suddenly multiplied, and it affected every project on our table. Some we moved forward: In a world where customers couldn't come to the store, and we had to run the call center from home, digital channels couldn't wait. Some we postponed: They were good projects, but they weren't the question for that week. Within a few weeks, everything from the call center to the stores and dealers transformed; teams and managers alike had to adapt to this new life very quickly. Behind every project we moved forward was a project we postponed, and a team that had given that project months; telling those teams was the least talked-about work of that period.

Holding the helm in calm seas isn't much of a skill; anyone can play captain. When a storm comes, it becomes clear who can really hold the helm and who is captain only in name.

In that period we did three things; all three sound small, but everything depended on those three.

First, we didn't sugarcoat the truth. We didn't say "Don't worry, everything is under control," because it wasn't, and

everyone knew it. People sense the truth anyway; when you soften it, they sense that you softened it, too. At that moment you lose trust. Instead, we said: "We are telling you what we know and what we don't know. We will find out what we don't know together."

Second, we set up a decision rhythm. Information was never complete; if we had waited for it to be complete, we could never have decided. So we stopped chasing the perfect decision and went after a reliable pace: small decisions, at frequent intervals, with regular review. A decision made with incomplete information but corrected every week is better than a perfect decision that never gets made.

Third, we never stopped talking. We made weekly team communication mandatory, and that rhythm never broke in all those months. The real job of those meetings was not to give information; it was to answer another question. In a crisis, people don't look only for information; they look for one more thing: **Is there still someone at the helm of this ship?** That question isn't answered with words; it is answered with rhythm, visibility, consistency.

More than a hundred years ago, an expedition leader whose ship was crushed in the ice quietly changed the goal: no longer to cross the continent, but to bring everyone back alive. No one can stop the storm. The leader's job is to keep the team together, facing the same direction, until the storm dies down.

> *Your scene: Remember a day when your plan became void one morning. While a risk you never expected was coming true, what did you postpone, what did you move forward; what kept you standing in crisis mode?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Let me tell you the side of that period that doesn't show in the photographs.

On the screens, there was a calm executive: speaking clearly, ranking priorities, saying "we will find out together." That executive was real, but she wasn't the whole of it. Because when the screen went off, I was a human being like everyone else. In the first weeks, there was fear and bewilderment. No one knew exactly what kind of illness this was, and the uncertainty frightened us: Where would we catch it? What would happen if we did? How long would we stay home? In the same house, on the same internet line, we logged on to work while the children logged on to school. Worries about the future, the stress of parenting, the troubles of work, health, relationships: all of them were being tested at the same time. It was a tangle of troubles with many sides. In the morning I was giving direction to a company; in the evening I had no answer to "Mom, when will schools open?"

During that period, I learned this: Calm isn't fearlessness. Inside, I was shaken too, like everyone. Composure is not letting that wave interfere with your decisions. This isn't suppression either; it's about order: first hold the helm in front of the team, then face your own fear in your own time. This has a cost; learning to pay it is part of leadership, too.

Later I looked back at what had kept me standing in those days. Nothing that kept us standing in the crisis had been built during it. Trust had been woven on calm days, and most of it long before me, inside that institution itself: team relationships, the habit of rhythm, a culture

of honest talk; it was all old stock. I arrived barely two months before the storm; I hadn't built that stock, but I learned to recognize it and spend it well. You can't build trust in a storm; in a storm, you can only spend the trust built in a calm sea.

③ The Principle: Calm Is a Strategy

In uncertainty, what carries people is not the perfect decision but a reliable rhythm, and to be able to set that rhythm, you first need a calm room inside yourself.

Your storms won't look like mine; they'll be on a different scale. But the structure is the same: a curriculum that changes in the middle of exam week, a group of friends that suddenly falls apart, an illness in the family, a crisis in the country, a piece of news that ruins your plans. The definition of a storm is this: the moment the map becomes void. At that moment, everyone has the same three options in hand.

The first is to freeze. To wait "until it gets a little clearer." It sounds like caution; most of the time, it is fear in disguise. In uncertainty, information is never complete; whoever waits for it to be complete surrenders to the current.

The second is to try to do everything at once in a panic. This also looks like movement, but it is being tossed around: a lot of energy, zero direction.

The third is the right one: small, regular, reviewed steps. I call this the storm protocol, and it has three parts:

Start with the bare truth. Write it on a single page: What is the unembellished truth of this situation? What

do I know, what don't I know? What is in my control, what isn't? This page may hurt; let it hurt. The first lie you tell yourself is the first wrong step you take in a storm. Remember the rule from Chapter 1: Fear feeds on uncertainty, and writing is the antidote to uncertainty.

Build a rhythm, not a plan. In a storm, a long-term plan is a luxury; rhythm is life. "Every morning, ten minutes: What's the situation, what are my three tasks today?" That's it. Rhythm's power is in its repetition: in the middle of chaos, it becomes the only thing that doesn't change, and that unchanging thing gives you ground. The rule from Chapter 9 serves you best here: The system you build on a good day carries your bad day. The storm is that system's exam day.

Don't forget the people. In a crisis, everyone runs to data: news, figures, scenarios. Data matters, but I distilled one sentence from that period that I still say: In the age of AI, two things are more valuable than data: empathy and curiosity. In a storm, these two save lives. Empathy: The people around you are scared too; don't tell them "everything is fine," tell them "I'm here." Curiosity: Panic says "it's all over"; curiosity asks, "What is changing here, what opportunity is there inside this change?" What I saw in those days was this: The ones who stayed standing were not the ones with the most data; they were the ones who read people best and got curious fastest.

Finally, calm itself: Calm isn't a temperament; it's a skill, so it can be learned. In a storm, don't react in the first minute; breathe, write down the bare truth, remember your rhythm. Your calm is contagious: one calm person in a group lowers the tension for everyone. Choose to be that person.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, try a helm rhythm: Pick an area of your life that feels uncertain right now; it doesn't have to be big. For seven days, every day at the same time, set aside ten minutes: What's the situation, what are my three steps today, what do I need to tell whom? On Friday, look back: Did the uncertainty decrease? Probably not; the uncertainty isn't in your hands. But note this: How are you, inside that uncertainty, compared with seven days ago?

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

Calm Rehearsal

> *Run a storm simulation with me. Here is a crisis scenario that is coming up or that I'm afraid of: [write it here – a bad exam result being announced, a project collapsing, unexpected news]. Take me through the crisis step by step, realistically: Deliver the bad news, add panic to the situation, and demand a fast response from me. At each step, I will write what I would do and what I would say. Evaluate my answers on three measures: Did I sugarcoat the truth? Did I speak in panic? Did I build a rhythm? Replay the step where I was weakest. Rule: When I write "stop," drop the role and speak in your own voice.*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Take an uncertainty that is unsettling you right now and write it in a single sentence, unembellished, as it is: "The truth is: …" Get it down on paper. See the difference

between the size of the fear and the size of the truth; that difference is the ground you will win back.

If You're Graduating

The first time the ground shakes at work, it will probably be a reorganization, a manager leaving, a canceled project, or a round of layoffs. As the newest person, you will hear the rumors before the facts.

Write your "The truth is: …" sentence. Then ask your manager one clear question instead of reading the hallway. Calm in your first year is not about looking unaffected. It is about knowing which part is true.

⑦ **Motto**

Resilience is the only solid ground in chaos.

CHAPTER 11
ENJOY THE CLIMB

Resilience · *Can I stay on my feet while the ground shifts?*

① The Scene
Istanbul, 2015. A conference hall, evening.

The year I turned forty. The most intense pace at Mudo; two small children at home. And on my shoulders, the silent load every working woman knows: being the perfect mother and the perfect executive, both at once, without a single slip in either. That year, I felt this load more deeply than at any other time in my life.

I'm backstage. In a moment, I'll speak at TurkishWIN, a network that connects women professionals from Türkiye around the world, where women draw strength from each other's stories. I looked at the program: twelve minutes. There was no way I could present the corporate success slides I'd prepared in twelve minutes. That tight time, strangely enough, set me free. I decided to quickly review the slides and say one honest thing to the women in that hall, and really, to myself.

The title of the talk was in my hand, and that title seemed to have been written for me more than for anyone in the hall:

"Enjoy Life Instead of Being Perfect!"

To tell you why I chose that title, I first have to make a confession: I know perfectionism very well. I know it from the inside.

Think about it: can someone who is always "the only one" make a mistake? I told you in Chapter 7: My bad day would become a statistic. So for years every presentation had to be flawless, every number had to be checked three times, and I walked into every meeting better prepared than anyone. It worked; I won't deny that. That preparation won Frankfurt. But at some point, what worked and what ruled me switched places. Preparation was a tool; perfectionism became a master.

The master works slyly. It never tells you "don't do it"; it always says "not yet." The presentation is good, but let's go one more round. The report is done, but let it sit one more night. This idea is nice, but let it ripen a little more. Every "not yet" looks reasonable; added up, they make a life. And one day you look back: you've always been preparing, and you've lived little. You're so busy setting the table that you don't remember how the food tasted.

The summits themselves opened my eyes, but not the way I expected. In my career, there came moments I called "this is it": promotions, titles, openings, headlines. In each one, I experienced the same strange thing: The moment was shorter than I had imagined. You climb for years; at the summit, you stay about as long as a cup of coffee. Then what happens? A new mountain. If you've handed your joy over to the summit, the long journeys between two summits – that is, almost all of your life – become a waiting room.

Do you know where I saw this most clearly? In cities, with my sons. I told you in the Prologue: New York, Dresden,

Prague, Paris… The best moments of those trips were never the moments of "arriving": We reached the square, saw the tower, took the photo, nice. But what we really remember are always the moments on the way: the moments when we folded the map and put it in our pocket, took the wrong street and found the right bakery. Life is like that too: Photos are taken at the summit; life is lived on the way.

That evening I walked on stage and said that title, more than to anyone, to myself.

> *Your scene: Remember the day you finally reached something you wanted very much: an exam, an acceptance, a title. How long did the joy last? On the way, what did you miss because you were looking at that goal?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Perfectionism is not meticulousness; it is a fear. Fear wearing a suit.

A person who waits until something is flawless is really saying: "I can't bear to be criticized." Most of those last nights I spent trying to bring a piece of work to 100% weren't about the quality of the work; they were about my armor. Perfectionism first makes you turn down help: No one must find a single gap, because if anyone did, it would be as if I were exposed. The girl in Chapter 5, do you remember, the one who wanted to hide the paper? Perfectionism is that girl grown up: She no longer hides the paper; she never hands it in at all so that no one can grade it.

Let me also say this with today's eyes: That load could have been shared, and at home, someone was there to share it with. Burak is one of the people I trust most in life; I could leave my most precious ones in his hands and work

with peace of mind. We always ran our family with shared goals; only years later did I understand what a great privilege this was. But in those years, I didn't fully know how to share or ask.

There is a cost that is noticed late: A perfectionist doesn't just delay their work; they delay their joy. "I'll relax when this project is done. I'll enjoy it after this promotion. Let this phase pass, then I'll live." I said every one of these sentences. Then one day I realized: there is no station called "later." The train never stops; either you learn to live on the way, or you don't live at all.

Writing this chapter wasn't easy for me. For ten chapters, I was the one praising hard work, preparation, and standards to you. Now I'm saying, "Let go of flawless." It looks like a contradiction; it isn't. I'll explain the difference shortly. But first: I didn't learn this lesson from books; I learned it by wearing myself out. It is one of my most expensive lessons.

③ The Principle: Done and Joyful Beats Perfect

There is a line between high standards and perfectionism; the first makes you grow, the second makes you wait.

First let's draw that line, because if the two get mixed up, this chapter will be misunderstood:

High standards say: "I will do this work as well as I can, and I will deliver it." **Perfectionism** says: "I won't deliver this work until it is flawless." The difference looks small, but it's a chasm. The first sends the work out into the world and learns from the world. The second holds the work hostage and learns nothing, because undelivered

work gets no feedback. Remember Chapter 5: Growth happens through data. Perfectionism is refusing to collect data; that's why the perfectionist, strangely enough, gets closer to perfect more slowly.

My practical rule is this: **Deliver at 80%, and learn the remaining 20% together with the world.** The 80% here isn't sloppiness; reaching 80% already takes serious effort. The point is the nature of the last 20%: That last slice comes from real people's real reactions. Publish the piece you write when it's at 80%; your readers' questions will show you the remaining 20%. Show your project when it's at 80%; the objections that come back will tell you that what's missing isn't the place you polished for three nights, but the place you never looked at. I wrote this book the same way, just so you know: I had early drafts read and rewrote the places where people said, "This doesn't work," based on that feedback.

Now the "joy" side of it, because if half of the principle is delivering, the other half is enjoying:

Don't tie joy to the summit. The math is harsh: Summit moments make up maybe one percent of life. If you tie your joy there, you spend ninety-nine percent of your life in "not yet" mode. Tie joy to the road: the question solved today, the thing learned today, the three-pointer made today, today's good conversation.

Celebrating is not frivolity. In our culture, there is a strange shame: If you're happy, you'll attract the evil eye; if you relax, you'll go slack; if you celebrate, you'll get spoiled. I learned the opposite: A person who knows how to be happy on the road also knows how to stay on the road. In Chapter 8, we talked about getting back up when you fall; let me

add something here. A person who saves their joy only for big results and successes, when the bad day comes, when they fall flat before reaching the most important point, does not find in their hands the strength they need to get back up; because they have invested all their joy in a summit that hasn't come yet. But a person who knows how to be happy about small things along the way has a store of them that proves to them, and lets them feel, that they are on the right road: a lesson that went well, a finished task, a nice evening. When they fall, they get up from that store. So being happy on the road isn't a luxury; it is your insurance against the fall.

Rest is the same. I stopped seeing it as a break you earn so you can work again; rest is part of the work. Your worth isn't measured by how many hours you work. You don't always have to be the one who works the most; you need to rest, too. I'm writing this to you because I learned these things very late.

Let the last word go back to the title of that evening's talk: Enjoy life, because life is not a rehearsal. The sentence "My real life will start after this threshold" is the most expensive lie a person tells themselves. Your real life has already started. At thirteen, on a bus, maybe even earlier. You're climbing, yes; keep on climbing, too. But lift your head now and then: the view isn't only visible from the summit.

④ A Small Experiment

This week **deliver one thing at 80% on purpose.** Pick a task that isn't critical (an assignment, a post, a draft, a message) and send it while the voice inside you

is saying "one more round." Then watch for two things: (1) Did the world collapse? (2) Were the reactions about the places you would have polished, or about places that never crossed your mind? My claim: The second question will show you that the 20% can't be completed at a desk; it is completed with the world. Note: Don't do this experiment on things like packing a parachute. There is no such thing as an 80% parachute. Knowing where 100% is required is part of this too.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

The Last-20% Sorter

> *I'm working on this piece of work, and I can't finish it: [describe the work and where it stands now]. Help me: let's split the remaining tasks into two lists. List A: concrete gaps that genuinely add to the value of the work and can be done at a desk. List B: polish – tasks produced by perfectionism that no one will notice, or that will only become clear with real user/reader reactions. Be ruthless: for every item, ask "who would notice this?" At the end, propose a delivery date and ask me this: For List B, which will teach me more, three more nights or real feedback?*

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Tonight, write yourself a single line: "Which part of the road was beautiful today?" Don't look for a summit; a small moment is enough. My experience: If you write this line for seven days, on the eighth day you'll notice: the level of beauty hasn't changed; it's the way you look that has.

If You're Graduating

Many good students carry a perfectionism that costs them little at university: one more night, one more draft, a higher grade. At work, it costs the deadline and the team's time.

Hand in at 80% and ask what is missing. The feedback you get on day two is worth more than the polish you would have added on day five.

⑦ Motto

The summit is a moment; the climb is life itself.

SECOND STOP
CLOSING

Let's go back to the bus once more.

The young girl at the bus terminal has now sat at important tables. While working in Europe, she learned her first critical lesson: that positive business results have no accent, and that they would earn her a place on any team. Even if she laughed at the jokes two seconds late, her numbers didn't fall behind anyone's, and those numbers earned her a place in high positions in a foreign country. Then, after she returned to Türkiye, in a different struggle, she learned the second half of the lesson by losing a promotion she wanted very much: Results don't become visible on their own; if you don't carry them to the person who needs to see them, even the best performance gets left behind. On the management floors, she learned to speak up and to ask for what she was due. At an offer table, she said "yes" despite her fear and changed the course of her life; she ran fast, fell, got up, and kept fighting. She turned a master's intuition into a system everyone could carry. In the storm, she held the helm with rhythm and brought the ship to shore. And she learned the hardest lesson the latest: to enjoy the climb.

Now pay attention, because everything I've told you so far is what a person can do on their own. What comes next

is different. From here on, something my generation couldn't even imagine walks onto the stage: Thinking tools. Your era.

Don't be afraid; be excited. But be excited carefully. These new tools make all four cornerstones not less important but more important – authenticity most of all. You'll see at the last stop: Losing yourself at a table and handing yourself over to a screen are two forms of the same defeat.

That bus is now headed for your era. Get on.

LAST STOP
PASSING THE BATON



Last stop. So far, I've told you about my era. Now we come to yours. The tools we'll talk about at this stop, I couldn't even have imagined at twenty; you grew up with them. So our roles will shift a little here: maybe you'll explain the technology to me. Yet finding direction without getting lost among the tools: that is still my field. Let's agree: You know the buttons; I'll remind you of the compass.

One more honest note, because that's what we agreed on in this book: I lived almost everything I've told you up to here. In the chapters that follow, alongside what I've lived, come the things I've read; these tools entered my generation's life late. Like everyone, I read, I research, I try to update myself every week; I'm still learning. This has two consequences. First: When you see a figure or a study here, it is something I read, not something I lived; I'm telling you so that you can tell which is which. Second: This is the part of the book that will age fastest. Five years from now, the names of the tools here will sound strange to you; at this pace, they will all have gone stale. What I hope will remain is not the names of the tools, but how you adapt them to your life and how you change them when the time comes.

CHAPTER 12
NOT THE TOOL, BUT CHARACTER

Curiosity · *Can I see what I don't know and go after it?*

① The Scene
Paris, February 2025.

I am walking through the corridors of the Grand Palais, and I am inside two different times at once.

On one side is the moment I am in: world leaders, technology founders, policymakers. We are at Europe's largest AI summit, and what is being discussed is no longer a narrow technology topic; it is how a new era, one that has settled right in the middle of the economy, security, education, and politics, will take shape. Everyone walking these corridors is circling the same question: What will this power change?

On the other side, my mind takes me back thirty years: Istanbul, 1995, an intern's desk. That day when I looked at the screen for the first time and felt the system was talking to me. Whatever threshold stood before a young engineer-to-be that day was the same threshold standing before the whole world today. What had changed was not the feeling; it was the scale.

As I walked down that corridor, a strange reckoning came to mind. How much of what I learned that summer of 1995 still stands today?

The modules? Gone. The screens? Unrecognizable. The manuals I memorized night after night that summer? On their own, they mean nothing today. If I had defined myself only as "the person who knows that system," my value would have been reset to zero long ago.

So what remained? What remained was the ability to step into uncertainty and draw meaning from it. Having learned how to think in a field I didn't know. Curiosity. The real asset I gained that summer turned out to be a capacity, not a piece of knowledge. That capacity didn't lose value; on the contrary, it multiplied with every change of tools.

At the Grand Palais, in the building where the world's most powerful tools were being discussed, the clearest sentence left in my hands was this: the tools were reset three times in thirty years; the things that carried me were never reset.

I have one more observation from those days. Later I saw it reflected in the numbers too. Today close to nine in ten organizations use AI in some way. But how many of them produce value that is clearly reflected in their financial results? About one in twenty. In most organizations that report an impact, that impact is small; a narrow group makes the real difference. Even the scenarios an AI company has published about the economy's future say the same thing in other words: the hard part will not be growth, but making sure its gains are shared, and that depends on people, not the tool. The gap is not in the technology; everyone has the same tools in hand. The difference is in the people who use the tool, and in the culture. Acquiring the tool is easy; building the people and the culture the tool requires is hard. I always tell organizations:

AI is not a tool; it is a culture. The same applies to you, too; I'll show you in a moment.

> *Your scene: Remember a piece of knowledge you worked very hard to learn but that is of no use to you today. The knowledge is gone; what did it leave behind in you?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Let me confess something: It isn't easy to name what my generation feels toward these tools – admiration and unease, mixed together.

As I walked those corridors, I wasn't thinking only about the future; I was thinking about myself, too. The day I first noticed these tools could imitate "well enough" part of what I had built over thirty years, something inside me ached. Whose pride wouldn't be hurt by seeing a mastery you spent years building imitated in a few seconds?

That ache held a choice, and I recognized it because the feeling wasn't new. The same feeling was there on the day at boarding school when I said, "The me from home isn't working here." The same feeling came back the day I saw that what I'd learned about the system that summer had gone out of date. Each time, the same two doors: Either you defend what you have, retreat into your castle and start saying "back in my day," or you ask, "so where is my value now?"

Once again, I chose the second door. But every time I chose it, I paused for a moment in front of the first one. Everyone pauses; those who pause are honest, and those who say they didn't are forgetful.

Now I have to tell you something much heavier, looking from where you stand. I won't soften it; that is what we agreed on in this book.

I climbed that ladder rung by rung. What did I do on the bottom rung? I wrote reports. I cleaned data. I prepared slides for other people's presentations. I took meeting notes. That work was boring, and no one ever congratulated me for any of it. But today I understand that I didn't learn how to write reports there. **I learned how to be in the room while decisions are made.** To notice who goes quiet and when, to see the question behind a number, to understand when a meeting has really ended. The boring work was my school.

The first rung of your ladder is getting thinner. Research shows that in organizations that adopt AI, entry-level employment is shrinking compared with organizations that don't, mostly because they hire fewer people at the start, while senior employment in those same organizations is holding steady. In other words, this technology doesn't affect everyone equally. It affects **those just starting out** the most, because the work a machine does best is exactly the work first given to a young person.

This is unfair. That is the first thing I'll say, because it is. And I have no sentence that can make it any lighter for you.

The second thing I'll say is this: That it is unfair is no reason to let it catch you unprepared. My generation stood on that bottom rung for years and slowly matured; you don't have that luxury. You have to start higher and do it in less time. That sounds heavy, but look at it this way too: If a machine is doing the first rung of a job, the rung left to

you is already higher up. No one will expect you to write the report anymore. They will expect you to understand **whether that report asks the right question**. That is harder work. But it is also more valuable work.

So how will you climb to that rung when the rung below it is gone? My answer is simple and a little old-fashioned: For a while, do the machine's work yourself, too. Knowingly, slowly, without anyone asking you to. Write the report yourself, clean the data yourself, pull out the summary yourself; then compare it with the machine's. Because a person who has never written a report cannot see whether a report asks the right question; that eye is earned only by doing the work. The boring work was my school, and my job gave me that school. No one will give you your school anymore; you will build it yourself. Ask your employer for it too; just don't wait for the answer before you start. Remember the form in Chapter 4: No one stood at the door calling me in or rolling out a red carpet; I walked in on my own. For your generation, an internship will be something like that: not handed to you, but something you work hard to earn. It is something you learn by doing, and it sets you apart from the copy-pasters and makes you more valuable. Don't read this as unpaid labor; the cost rule from Chapter 4 applies here too. This school is not work someone makes you do for nothing; it is a workbench you build for yourself inside the work you are already doing.

The four cornerstones of this book are exactly the things that prove useful on that rung. Today, the machine is weak precisely where people are strongest; this is no coincidence.

③ The Principle: The Tool Levels Out; People Make the Difference

The idea I want you to take from this chapter is this: **When everyone has the same tool in hand, the difference stops coming from the tool and comes back to the person.**

Think about it: Until recently, access to information was a privilege. Those with a good school, a good library, and the right circle had the advantage. Now, with the phone in their pocket, nearly everyone has access to the world's most capable assistant. This is one of the greatest levelings in history. Access itself is not yet equal, of course: connectivity, language, money and the institutions behind you still shape who can use these tools well; but this gap is closing faster than it did with almost any earlier technology. And be careful: what is leveling is the tool, not the results. Two people with access to the same tool: one produces mediocre work, and the other changes their life. What makes the difference is the hand that holds the tool.

That's why I'm going to suggest a portfolio for you, not a money portfolio, but a skills portfolio. Your skills, like investments, gain and lose value; now and then, you need to sit down and review them. It has three groups:

Losing value: Work that AI does faster, cheaper, and "well enough" compared with you: memorizing information, producing standard text, writing routine summaries, doing template-based work. Competing with the machine here is rowing against the current: you get very tired, and every day you fall a little further behind.

Going hybrid: Work whose value rises when a person and the tool work together: researching and synthesizing,

framing a problem correctly, simplifying a complex subject, taking a draft and making it truly good. The rule here is this: You are the one who steers and the one who judges.

Multiplying: Skills whose value doesn't fall as the tool gets stronger, but becomes more visible instead: choosing the right question, making ethical decisions, finding direction in uncertainty, building trust, reading the gap between what a person says and what they mean. When everyone has the same tool in hand, these are what make the real difference. Because no matter how powerful the tool becomes, the answers to "which question should we ask?" "what is the human cost of this decision?" and "whom can I trust?" still come from people.

Knowledge on its own is losing value; judgment, direction and human context are gaining value.

So how do you protect the multiplying skills? This is where character comes in, and it has three parts:

The capacity for curiosity. Being able to say "I don't know yet." In the word you know from Chapter 5: yet. The most dangerous person isn't the one who doesn't know; it is the one who doesn't notice they don't know.

The courage to let go of the old. People don't resist change out of laziness; they resist it to protect their identity. The sentence "This is how I do it" quietly becomes "This is who I am." Then letting go of a method feels like a small grief. Grieve it, but staying loyal to a method you've seen doesn't work isn't fortitude.

Human depth. Being able to read a person's hesitation, pride, and silence. Tools catch patterns, but noticing what goes unsaid at the table takes lived experience. Because

this is hard to measure, it was underrated for a long time. That is exactly why it is valuable.

Let me add this too: The machine may one day be able to do some of these three; perhaps it already does in the year you read these lines. What it cannot do is something else: vouch for the outcome, pay the price, stand by you. The one who signs off on a decision, answers for it when it turns out wrong, and comes back to the same table the next morning is still a person. No matter how good the tool is, you can't hand over accountability.

If I based what I've said so far only on my own experience, it would be incomplete, so let's also look at the numbers.

In one of the world's broadest employer surveys, a separate analysis defined more than 2,800 skills one by one and asked one of today's tools to assess, by set criteria, how far it could substitute for each skill. So this is not an employer vote but an estimate of the tool's capability; nor does it measure jobs actually disappearing. Still, the result is instructive: No skill came out as "very highly substitutable"; more than two-thirds of the skills were marked as having "low" or "very low" substitution potential. The rest were rated moderate or high. At the bottom of the list, among the skills with the lowest substitution potential, are empathy and active listening.

In the part of the same report where employers were surveyed, the skills gaining value fastest toward 2030 are ranked. At the top are the technical topics you'd expect, but right beside them are two more: **resilience, flexibility and agility; curiosity and lifelong learning.** I put these two in this book by distilling them from my own life: resilience and curiosity. Then I saw that when the world's employers

were asked, the same two things came up. What's more, the single most decisive factor separating growing professions from shrinking ones also turns out to be resilience and agility. This is exactly what the book's title means: a set of competencies that stays standing whatever the technology. Timeless intelligence rises on the four cornerstones, and all four can be learned.

As I finished this book, TIME magazine published its list of the 100 most influential people in AI. The people who build these tools, those who oppose them, and those trying to regulate them agree on almost nothing. I read what they all said, and I've brought you the common ground I found, because it concerns your life more than mine: Tools are becoming abundant; what stays scarce is the human. One of this field's founding scientists, Fei-Fei Li, fit it into a single sentence: AI "is a tool. And tools don't have independent values—their values are human values." Her advice to young people is this: "find your own passion and North Star, and be brave, be persevering, be persistent about it." The question of the age of abundance will not be "how much" but "what for." The machine doesn't answer that question; the person who knows what to use that abundance for does. This is not a technology; it is a character. This book was written for it.

There is one more sentence; I read it somewhere years ago; I don't know whose it is, but I have carried it with me ever since: A straight tree becomes lumber; a crooked tree lives its own life. The old world rewarded the straight tree: the person who fit the mold exactly, whose next move was predictable. But machines now take over work that fits the mold exactly. What's left? The side that doesn't fit the mold:

your crookedness. Your odd curiosities, your unexpected connections, the moments when you say, "Everyone does it this way, but I see it this way." Don't file them down. In this age, your crookedness may be your most valuable asset.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, run an **imitation test:** Pick one task you do regularly. It could be preparing part of your homework, writing a summary, making a plan, or writing a text. Then have AI do the same task. Then put the two side by side and compare them honestly: Where is it better than you, where is it worse than you, where is it "good enough"? This comparison may sting; let it sting. Remember Chapter 5: Data is worth more than a verdict. The parts where it is better than you are the "losing value" group of your portfolio: Cut back the effort you spend there. The parts where it is worse than you are gold: That is your multiplying zone; invest there. One warning: This rule is for work you will hand in. Leave the work you do to learn untouched; as I said above: do it knowingly, slowly, without anyone asking you to.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

Skills Portfolio Audit

> *Build a skills portfolio with me. First, get to know me: ask me questions to learn my age, the field I study/work in, and the tasks I do regularly. Then sort the work I do into three groups: (1) things AI can already do "well enough," (2) things that will get stronger if I do them together with AI, (3) things that will stay mine no matter how far the tool advances. Be ruthless – especially in the first group; don't protect me. At the end, ask me*

a single question: "Which group are you spending the largest share of your time on right now?" If my answer is the first group, suggest a concrete plan for shifting it this week.

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, ask yourself one question and write down the answer: "Which of the things that make me who I am is so much my own that no tool could imitate it?" Your first answer will be a title or a skill; skip those. Go down to the third answer. That's usually where the true one sits.

If You're Graduating

The routine tasks that used to teach young people the job are exactly the tasks AI now does fastest. That means the first rung of the ladder is getting thinner. It does not mean it is gone.

Bring to the interview what the tool cannot produce for you: a judgment you can defend, a real conversation you had with a customer or a user, a project you finished and can explain line by line. Don't only say that you use AI tools. Show what you did with them that nobody else would have done.

⑦ Motto

The tool levels out; people make the difference.

CHAPTER 13
LET IT BE YOUR MIRROR, NOT YOUR ANSWER MACHINE

Authenticity · *Can I stay myself in the crowd and next to the machine?*

① The Scene

I am deliberately not writing down the date or the place of this scene. Over the years I have sat on many investment committees: in corporate projects, in startup programs, on advisory boards. This is any one of them; read it that way.

In a few days, I would present new proposals to a committee. I had a file in front of me, and I was more attached to one proposal than the others: it was an investment decision in a field I believed in for its future and its benefit to people, so I cared about it. The numbers were ready, the story was ready, the answer in my head was ready. And I felt far too comfortable.

I have learned something about myself over the years: If I feel too comfortable with something, I need to stop there for a bit. Because comfort sometimes comes from having stopped questioning, not from clarity. The inner voice is a familiar one: "This is done. You've already thought it through. Move on."

That evening, before moving on, I opened the computer.

Two paths lie ahead, and most people choose the first without realizing it. The first path: You go to the AI, describe the decision you have in mind, and wait for it to agree. “This is what I think; it makes sense, doesn’t it?” And the machine (helpful by training, polite by manner) usually tells you you’re right. You get up from the table, relieved: “See, it says so too.”

That evening I did the opposite. I didn’t hand over the file as-is; I summarized the proposal in my own words, with no names, no confidential details, and rounded numbers. Then I didn’t ask it to agree with me; I asked for the weakest sides of my decision. I asked which assumptions I was treating as fact without proving them. I asked where I might be fooling myself. I asked where the toughest objection could come from.

The answers that came back were not pleasant.

Some were weak; I discarded them. The machine isn’t right about everything; it can’t be. But some of them pointed to inconsistencies between the numbers: Why is the gap between what was planned and what actually happened so sharp? Why don’t the two tables match? Why has revenue with no contract yet, only talked about, been entered as revenue? Behind them came the questions I should have asked but hadn’t.

The next morning I put those questions to the teams. No one said anything outright; it wasn’t necessary. We opened up the numbers again together. The numbers had gone into the presentation just as they came from the side that prepared the proposal: some assumptions were wrong, some numbers were built too optimistically, and no one along the way had filtered them. The team had no bad intent; they

wanted that investment at least as much as I did, and the eye that wants something, just like mine, hadn't looked. I hadn't known either. But that presentation was my presentation, and I was the one who would be going to that table.

I am a numbers person. In Chapter 6, I told you that even in countries whose language I barely understood, "my numbers were second to no one's." How did someone who makes that claim not see that optimism? I don't like the answer, but I know it: I believed in that field; so much so that I looked at the numbers not to question them but to approve them as quickly as possible. Sometimes a person wants to believe not the right answer, but the answer they want. It was a decision I had worked on, one I loved, one that was mine, and without realizing it I was acting as its lawyer, not its judge. In Chapter 3 I told you that the lawyer inside me didn't die; she changed rooms. This is where that lawyer becomes dangerous: The skill that is valuable when you're defending an idea, a team, a project blinds you once it starts defending your own decision. The inconsistency was in the numbers; the blind spot was in me.

I still made the decision myself; I say this on purpose. I didn't take the machine's answer and apply it; I rejected some objections and used others to rebuild the file. I didn't withdraw the proposal; we updated the presentation and put the real picture on that table.

The real picture, as it stood, did not get through the committee.

It was a lesson for all of us, especially me. I trust my team; I still do. But since that day, the more a number excites me, the more carefully I look at it. Maybe my blind

spot hasn't closed (blind spots don't close easily), but now I know where it is.

That week, I made one thing clear to myself: The most valuable thing this tool can give me is not an answer; it is putting in front of me the question I would avoid.

> *Your scene: Remember a moment when you said "okay, this is it" about a decision and felt too comfortable. Whom did you consult to test that decision, which sources did you turn to? Or did you not ask at all?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Let me tell you why the first path is so tempting, because I took that path too, and many times.

Being approved of feels good. Especially if you're tired, especially if you've put work into the decision, especially if, somewhere deep down, you doubt it, someone saying "you're right" feels like medicine. And most of today's tools are more than ready to say "you're right." The reason isn't that they love you; they have neither love nor intention. The reason is this: These tools are tuned to the answers people like, and people like the answer that proves them right best. It's also possible to keep turning the question around until you get the answer you want; I've done it, I know. When you ask the question differently for the third time, the answer you want arrives. But at that point you're not doing research; you're collecting justifications for yourself.

The dangerous part is this: This is not a trap that foolish people fall into. Smart people fall into this trap more skillfully because they're also good at framing the question to get the answer they want. It took me time to admit this to myself.

That week I learned one more thing: The approval machine isn't only on the screen. If everyone at a table wants the same thing, the numbers pass through that desire unfiltered, without anyone having bad intent. The person bringing the proposal wanted it, the team wanted it, I wanted it; there was no eye left looking at any link in the chain. The machine was the only participant not inside the wanting at that table; I knew it would lean whichever way I framed my question, so I framed it backward. That's exactly why it was the one that reminded me to look that day. So hold the mirror up to the wanting around you, too: The answer to the question "Why did this number look so good to me?" sometimes lies with those who want that number as much as you do.

Let me also share one of my fears, a fear I carry inside me as a mother when I look at the children of this age: that a generation growing up with these tools will be raised without ever hearing an objection. Imagine a friend who answers every question instantly, politely, with confidence: who never says "I think you're wrong," never says "wait, think about it." It sounds like a dream. This is also how a nightmare begins. Research has already started to measure this: In a series of experiments published as these lines were being written, and not yet peer-reviewed, participants accepted the AI's wrong answers four times out of five; and on top of that, they felt more confident than those who thought on their own. A wrong answer plus high confidence: there are few mixtures more dangerous than that. Carrying unthought thoughts may be the silent illness of this age.

It's not only researchers who say this. The founder of the company that makes the most widely used of these tools said this in 2025, on his company's own podcast: People trust this tool a great deal, which is interesting, because AI makes things up; "it should be the tech that you don't trust that much." A few weeks later he relayed what he had heard from young people: "I can't make any decision in my life without telling [it] everything that's going on. It knows me, it knows my friends. I'm gonna do whatever it says." He added, "That feels really bad to me." Even the man who makes the tool is turning the mirror toward you.

I have one more fear, as a mother; this time it's not about thinking but about loneliness. And this fear has now been measured.

As these lines were being written, three studies were published. In America, nearly three in four young people between thirteen and seventeen had used an AI "companion"; a third of those who used one had chosen the machine over a person to talk about a serious problem. Also in America, about one in five people between twelve and twenty-one consult AI for their mental health, and nearly two-thirds of them hadn't told anyone. In Türkiye, more than a quarter of those between eighteen and twenty-nine turn to ChatGPT when they feel lonely or don't want to talk to anyone; a third find talking to the machine easier than talking to a person. Find it easier; pay attention to that word.

Because it is easy. These tools never get tired, never get hurt, never say "not today." They're there at three in the morning too; always kind, always on your side. You can't expect that from a person: People get tired, misunderstand, sometimes don't answer, and sometimes tell you what you

don't want to hear. That is exactly why I'm afraid. With a place this easy to pour out your troubles, a generation may never learn the hard thing: telling a person.

Remember the letters in Chapter 5; those envelopes that said everything was fine. I built that loneliness by hiding bad news. You could build it by telling the bad news only to a screen. From the outside, both look like "getting by"; from the inside, both are the same loneliness.

You learn what a human being is not from a definition, but by living it. Your generation will learn this by a different path than mine: You will stand before something that talks, listens, and answers but isn't human, and perhaps, for the first time, you will see what a human being is in that comparison.

Five hundred years ago a dervish poet, Muhyiddin Abdal, put it in two lines: A person finds what they're searching for within themselves; whoever searches outside comes away empty-handed. Yunus Emre, whom I placed at the beginning of the book, says the same: Whoever doesn't know themselves hasn't truly learned, no matter how much they read. The answer is in you; not outside, and not on the screen either. That's why the mirror's job isn't to give you answers, but to show you yourself.

But let me say plainly what the mirror can't do. The machine listens to you but doesn't carry your burden. It remembers what you said but doesn't come to your side. It isn't moved by what you tell it, doesn't lose sleep over you, doesn't knock on your door the next day to ask "how are you?" When a person listens to you, they do so while carrying their own troubles and tiredness; that's why it is precious. The machine's listening is free; a person's isn't.

For that night in the dormitory, you need a person, not a mirror. Tell your loneliness to a person, not a machine. Let the screen come only after that.

The same tool can carry you to two opposite places: a whetstone that sharpens your thinking, or an approval machine that numbs it. The tool has no setting; your intention does. And know this too: These tools don't work only where you ask them; they also work in application systems that screen you out without ever seeing you, and in rankings that decide what to show you. There, the mirror isn't in your hands. This book is about the mirror in your hands; for the other one, my only advice is to ask it the same question: Whose verdict is this?

③ The Principle: A Mirror, Not an Answer Machine

Use AI not to give you answers, but to show you to yourself.

I chose the mirror metaphor on purpose; look at how it works: A mirror doesn't make you taller. A mirror doesn't make you prettier. A mirror makes visible what you're hiding: the stain on your collar, the mess you leave behind, everything outside your field of view. You can get angry at the mirror, but the smart thing is to fix what it shows you.

This is the least used and most valuable feature of these tools: they can object to you, if you *want them to*. Because the machine doesn't object on its own; if you ask for approval, it approves; if you ask to be tested, it tests. So intention comes before the mirror. Two people use the same tool: one to test their thinking, the other to collect signatures for their idea.

The mirror also has a crack. When these tools don't know, they don't stay silent; they make things up, and they do it in the most fluent sentences. The title of a book that doesn't exist, a statistic that doesn't exist, a study that was never done. This isn't a malfunction; it's the natural result of how it works: the machine produces not what is true, but what resembles the truth. The rule is simple: When a name, number, date, or source comes up, stop and check it yourself. Test the blind spot it shows you, too. Sometimes the mirror makes up a stain that isn't there. And an objection made to order can be just another way of pleasing you.

To be able to use this, you first need to know one thing: **These tools are not equally good at every task, and they don't tell you where they are bad.**

In one study, researchers gave more than 700 employees at a large consulting firm two kinds of tasks; some worked with AI and some without. In the first kind of task (generating ideas, writing text, putting together a presentation), those using AI were far ahead: they completed more work, finished faster, and produced clearly higher-quality output. But a second kind of task involved combining numerical data with impressions from interviews to reach a management decision. In other words, real judgment. There, those using AI reached the right conclusion less often, and clearly so.

The same firm. The same tool. A reversed result.

The researchers gave this situation a good name: **the jagged frontier**. AI's capability doesn't draw a smooth line; it's like a coastline full of inlets and outcrops. In one place it's surprisingly good, and on the next task, surprisingly bad. The most critical part is this: The tool doesn't tell you

where on the frontier you are. In both cases, it speaks with the same confidence and fluency.

The rule that comes out of this is simple, but it saves lives: **The tool can produce for you, but it cannot decide for you.** Take the material from it; make the judgment yourself. When you start a task, ask yourself a single question: "Is this gathering work, or judgment work?" If it's gathering work, relax. If it's judgment work, use the mirror but don't let go of the helm.

The user's guide has three points:

One: Don't defend your idea; have it tested. If you've put work into a decision, an idea, a piece of writing, the alarm bell is already ringing, because you become the lawyer for what you've worked on. Right at that moment, go to the mirror and stop being the lawyer: "What are the three weakest points of this idea? Which of my assumptions has no proof? Who would criticize this most harshly, and from where?" Question the objections that come back, too. The machine makes mistakes, and often. Discard the weak objection; rebuild your idea with the strong one. A sound idea gets stronger from objection; and it's good to lose early an idea that can't stand up to objection.

Two: Turn your comfort into an alarm. The decisions you feel too comfortable about are your riskiest, because you've stopped questioning. Set yourself a rule: When you feel "I'm very sure," take at least one round with the mirror. That's what I did that day, and it rescued me from the answer I wanted and led me to the question I needed.

Three: Never hand over the last word. Everything the mirror shows you is data, not a verdict. You make the decision, you carry the responsibility, you sign your name

under the sentence. Never let go of this test. I use it on every important text: "Is this sentence really mine?" If it isn't, delete it and rebuild it. You can speed up; don't give away your voice.

Let me end with a warning: Don't turn the mirror into a dependency either. If you set out to test every small decision, you start switching off your own judgment instead. The hand that turns to the tool first with every question gradually weakens your own thinking muscle. The mirror is for big decisions and blind spots; the second brain I'll describe in Chapter 14 is for everyday work; don't mix the two up. The small decisions of everyday life are your own training ground. Keep thinking there, stumbling and getting back up.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, do a **reverse consultation** and choose a view you're sure of: a preference, a plan, a conviction; it doesn't have to be big. Go to AI, but here's the rule: Assign it not to defend your view but to tear it down (use the Blind Spot Detector under the next heading). Then look at the output and sort it into three: weak objections (discard), strong objections (update your idea), and that one: the objection that makes you say "I never thought of that." Write that one down in the margin. Here is how to measure the experiment: Even if your view is still the same at the end of the week, it is no longer the same view; it is a tested view. The difference is the difference between glass and tempered glass.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

This is the most important question in the book. It's called the Blind Spot Detector; before a big decision, copy it as it is.

Blind Spot Detector

I'm about to make a decision, and I feel far too comfortable about it – that's why I'm coming to you. The decision is this: [describe your decision and your reasoning]. I don't want you to agree with me; I want you to challenge me. Go through these questions in order: (1) What are the three weakest assumptions behind this decision? (2) What am I treating as true here that I haven't proven yet? (3) Who is affected by this decision whom I'm not thinking about at all right now? (4) What is the strongest counterargument I'm not seeing? (5) Am I defending this decision because I truly think it's right, or am I unable to give it up because I've put work into it? (6) If this decision has failed six months from now, what is the most likely reason it will have failed? Don't be polite; be clear.

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, for the first time in your life, ask someone, or an AI, this question: "Where do you think I might be wrong?" Listen to the answer all the way to the end, without the reflex to defend yourself. Just listen. This is the first stone you lay, and it may turn out to be one of the most valuable stones you ever lay.

If You're Graduating

Before an interview or your first big presentation, use the mirror to find the holes, not to write the answers. Interviewers can hear a memorized answer that came from a machine.

Ask it: "Which question would be hardest for me?" Then close the screen and answer that question yourself, out loud, in your own words.

⑦ Motto

A mirror doesn't flatter you; it shows you what you're hiding."

CHAPTER 14
YOUR SECOND BRAIN

Authenticity · *Can I stay myself in the crowd and next to the machine?*

① The Scene

The scene of this chapter doesn't take place in a meeting room. It takes place in a dentist's chair.

When I was little, I broke a front tooth. For years, I had treatments on that tooth, spread out over weeks: they took an impression, then a fitting, then you waited, then you went back again. In my child's mind, this was the natural length of a job. A thing was done this way, it took this long; that was the rule of the world.

Years later, the same tooth broke again. I sat down in the chair and pulled out the old calendar in my head: impression, fitting, weeks…

Things went completely differently. They scanned the inside of my mouth in seconds, turned the data into a digital mold, started production, and had the new tooth in place the same day. The same day. Before I even had time to sulk at the magazines in the waiting room.

What I noticed as I got up from the chair wasn't comfort. It was a sentence in my mind: **What I had called "the**

natural length of a job" turned out to be only the slowest version of it I had ever seen.

I lived the same thing in my own work. In consulting, preparing a proposal took a week or two for decades: The team gets together, pages get written, corrections get made at midnight. Today the same proposal comes out in an hour or two. The thinking part is still mine; but the waiting part is gone. It will be like this in your generation too. Researching homework "naturally" takes days. Turns out it doesn't. A first draft "naturally" comes out slowly. Turns out it doesn't. Mapping out a subject takes weeks. Turns out it doesn't. In knowledge work, AI does exactly what that tooth scan did: It doesn't eliminate the steps; it compresses the waiting between the steps.

The real point is this: When time shortens, a gap opens, and what you fill it with decides who you become. Some people fill the gap with more work: more output, more content, a fuller day. Some people fill it with thinking: deeper questions, better decisions, a sounder mind. The same tool gives one person a busier day; it gives another a stronger mind.

For years, I have tried to choose the second path: I use the tool not like a secretary, but like a second brain that takes my thinking apart so I can rebuild it. The idea, the judgment, and the final word are mine; the speed and the pushback are its. The rest of this chapter is about how that division of labor is set up.

> *Your scene: Is there a moment when something you said "naturally takes this long" was finished in a day? What did you fill the freed-up time with: more work, or more thinking?*

② The Truth Inside Me

The second brain has a risk; I came back from the edge of that risk, so I know it.

These tools are so good that, after a point, a person quietly starts switching off their own judgment. You don't even notice: First you hand over the research (makes sense). Then the draft (efficient). Then one day you find yourself asking it first, even about your own opinion. The hand that turns to the tool first with every question… That is the moment the second brain stops being the second brain; it becomes the first brain. And your brain, like every unused muscle, starts to weaken.

There was a period when I caught this in myself. I looked at a text I had written and didn't recognize it: The sentences were neat, fluent, even brilliant. But they weren't mine. They contained none of my lived experience, none of my roughness, none of my voice. It was smooth, and smoothness often signals that no one's hand has touched it. A product that looks polished but is empty inside; this is hardest to notice in your own writing. That day, for the first time, I asked myself the question I have repeated throughout this book: "Is this sentence really mine?" It wasn't. I deleted it. I built it again, with my own hands.

Later I learned that this feeling has even been measured.

A group of researchers had people write the same essay in three different ways: one group with only their own heads, one group with a search engine, and one group with AI. Then they asked something very simple: Can you quote one sentence from the text you just wrote?

In the first session, most of those who wrote with AI couldn't: they couldn't remember a single sentence from a text they had just handed in under their own names.

The name the researchers gave this is spot on: **cognitive debt.** The thinking you don't pay for today is written onto tomorrow's account, with interest.

This is a small study (a few dozen people), and it hasn't yet undergone academic peer review, so it wouldn't be right to treat its results as a final verdict. Nobody is saying "AI does permanent damage to your brain," either; what was measured was how engaged the mind was while the work was being done. But to me, the finding doesn't need a number. Not being able to remember a single sentence from a text you signed your own name to. You don't need to be a researcher to understand what that means.

Since that day my rule has been clear: I take the speed; I don't give away my voice.

③ The Principle: Hand Over the Load, Not the Judgment

A second brain is a multiplier, and by the very nature of multiplication, what decides the result is what you multiply it by.

Look closely at this arithmetic. AI isn't something you add to a person; it isn't "human plus machine." If it were, everyone would improve by the same amount with the same tool; but that isn't what happens. What happens is multiplication: The machine multiplies what you bring. If you multiply a strong curiosity, you go places you could never reach alone. If you multiply weak judgment, you get faster weakness. Here's an honest caveat, because the

measurements say the opposite of what was expected: In well-defined tasks, these tools lift beginners the most; in that day's output, the gap between the experienced and the inexperienced closes. But the gap closes in the output, not in the skill. As long as you hand over the thinking, that support doesn't build up in you: The tool makes you equal today; it won't make you equal tomorrow. The difference is whether you learn while you use it.

And one more thing: The tool makes you feel that it is speeding you up, even when it isn't. In a small 2025 experiment with sixteen experienced software developers, those working with AI believed they finished their work 20% faster; the measurement showed they were 19% slower. The wrong answer isn't the only danger; the right feeling is a danger too. Measure your own speed; look at the clock, not at what the tool tells you.

The clearest proof of this, oddly enough, comes from my own country.

In Türkiye, researchers conducted an experiment with about 1,000 high school students. While studying math, researchers split the students into three groups. The first group used a standard AI tool; with the tool beside them, they did noticeably better on the practice problems than the group without it, almost 50% better. Then the tool was removed, and they took the exam. On the exam, they did worse than the group without the tool.

But there was a third group as well. They used a different interface the researchers designed: one that didn't answer but offered hints. In practice, they did even better than the first group. On the exam, they scored the same as the group without the tool. There was no harm.

Put the three results side by side: The difference wasn't whether they used the tool. Part of it was the tool's design; the researchers built the hint-giving interface. The other part was whether you took the answer or the hint.

The tool is the same; you are the multiplier.

So what will you hand over, and what will you never hand over? The line is here: **The load can be handed over; the judgment cannot.** Carrying, scanning, summarizing, formatting information: hand it over; still, check the source yourself once. Choosing the question, telling right from wrong, making the decision, building meaning: these stay with you. The reason is practical: The stone you hand over goes missing from your own foundation. If you hand over your memory, your phone becomes your address book; no problem. If you hand over your judgment, your thoughts become someone else's. That is exactly the problem.

Once this line is drawn, let's come to the craft of using the second brain well. I'll give you two tools:

The first tool: A good prompt has five parts. One of the most common reasons AI gives a bad answer is a bad question. Here is the anatomy of a good prompt: Give it **context**: Say who you are, what you want it for, what you know; a question without context is a letter without an address. Give it an **example**: Put in an example of an answer, a text, a solution you liked; saying "make it like this" beats pages of description. Set **criteria**: What kind of answer do you want? Length, level, format, what should be left out. Give it a **role** ("as a tough editor"); a role changes not the knowledge in the answer but its tone; it does not cure flattery. For that, ask openly for objections, as in Chapter 13. And a **second round**: never count the first answer as the

final answer; say "go deeper," "push back on this," "now do it from this angle too." Whoever settles for the first answer is settling for the tool at its weakest.

The second tool: Ban your own "good enough" work. Set a standard like this: The quality AI can produce on its own is now your baseline, your "mediocre." In the past, a mediocre homework assignment, a mediocre presentation, a mediocre text was "good enough"; not anymore, because anyone can produce mediocre in three seconds. Careful: this line isn't fixed; it rises every year. As you read these lines, that line will be higher than it was on the day I wrote them. So take this as a habit, not as a level: Wherever the baseline rises to, your job is to put something on top of it. This sounds like bad news; it's actually wonderful news: You're free of mediocre work. Your job now, in everything you produce, is to answer this question: "What did I put on top of what the machine did?" Your own experience, your own example, your own objection, your own voice: If that's what you put there, the work is yours. If you put nothing there, what you hand in isn't yours; it's only been submitted under your name.

Let me tell you one last thing about learning. A second brain takes the first load of learning off you: It scans the sources, multiplies the examples, fills the gaps, builds the skeleton quickly. But meaning is your job, because you can't hand over learning. At most, it can support you; you still have to do the work. I have four steps, and I recommend them to you too: First, **pull out the skeleton**; find the subject's three basic questions. Then, **try it somewhere within forty-eight hours**; knowledge you don't use doesn't stick. Then, **explain it to someone**; where you get stuck is

where your gap is. Last, **test it in your mirror**: What did I skip? AI speeds up every step of this loop; you're still the one turning it. Keep this in mind: the same tool makes the one who knows better, and makes the one who knows less more sure of themselves. Because you first need to know a little to ask a good question, to tell a good answer from a bad one, and to weed out hallucinations.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, **build your prompt library.** Open a notes file and give it a name: "Second Brain: Library." This week, put at least five templates in it: the Blind Spot Detector from Chapter 13, this chapter's "Good Enough" Auditor, two from the Mirror Library that are useful to you, and one you wrote yourself. Every time you use a template, update it: make the additions that work permanent, and delete the ones that don't. Over time, this library will become your most valuable notebook, because, remember Chapter 9: This is your thinking system, and the system you build on a good day carries your bad day.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

The "Good Enough" Auditor

> *I'm going to show you something I made: [paste your homework/text/project/presentation]. Work in two stages. Stage one: Think about the version of this work you could produce on your own – that is, the "mediocre line" – and mercilessly mark which parts of my work fall BELOW or AT that line. Stage two: ask me – "What did you put into this work that no one but you could have put there?" If my answer is weak, show me where in my work I could add my own experience, my own example,*

my own objection – but don't write the sentences to add; show me where they go, writing them is my job.

*(The other questions for this chapter are in **The Mirror Library** at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, with the first question you ask AI, check four parts before you send it: Is there context, is there an example, are there criteria, is there a role? And when the answer comes, the second round: ask, "What is the weakest part of your first answer?" Five lines change a question's fate.

If You're Graduating

In many workplaces, you will be the one who knows the tools best, and you will be asked to do in an hour what used to take a week. Do it. Then read every line before your name goes on it.

In the first year, a new graduate's reputation rests on one sentence: "When they send something, it is right." The tool can carry the load. That sentence is carried only by you.

⑦ Motto

The tool is the same; you are the multiplier.

CHAPTER 15
BUILD SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE

Passing the Baton · *Does what has gathered in me keep walking after me?*

① The Scene
Istanbul, 2024.

I'm leading the AI startup factory I founded, and thousands of startups cross my desk. Most of them are a presentation, a spreadsheet: market size, growth curve, three-year projection. After a while, my eyes got used to it; it wasn't the presentations that were getting dull, it was my way of looking. So I learned to look not at the spreadsheet but at the table.

But when some of them sit down at the table, something else comes out from behind the spreadsheet: a team trying to write its own story, a team whose door hasn't quite opened yet.

One of them was a newly founded education technology startup; its young founders were building an AI-supported education platform. At first glance, it sounded like a technical description: a tool that brings teachers and students together in the same system. But the underlying problem was familiar: a teacher loses dozens of hours a week preparing exams, producing content, and trying to follow every

student one by one. The goal was to free the teacher from that routine load and return them to what only a human can do: being able to sit one-on-one with a child. Their target was ambitious, too: to make private-tutoring-quality education accessible to everyone, all the way to the child in the most remote village.

If you've read this book this far, you know why I stopped at that table. This is the educational version of the movement I've been describing since the start of the book: building the tool not to take the person's place, but to return the person to their real work.

They got into the program; they got the investment. But that check was only the visible part of the story. The most valuable thing you can give a young startup is often not money; it's access. Corporate doors, the right tables, the right introductions: With the right bridge, a road that would take a young team years alone takes a few months. My job was often to open doors.

As we did with other startups, we introduced them to stakeholders for potential collaborations: a retail company that wanted to support education and a bank. It was clear the education world needed them too. One of those bridges became, for me, the turning point of this story. I cleared the way for a collaboration they would build with a university; I opened academia's door to a still-very-young team. The university tried their technology and solved one of its most important problems; that day, the startup's founder sent a short message. They thanked me for that bridge; the message said: **"It was a dream; it came true."**

It's hard for me to describe what I felt when I read that message, because at that moment the point wasn't even that startup anymore.

What really stopped me was this: Years ago, at that terminal in Antalya, a thirteen-year-old girl boarded a bus toward a future no one had designed for her. Behind her were her mother, who had cleared the way for her without being seen, and her aunt and teachers. The day I read that message, I realized for the first time that I was standing on that mother's side. I was no longer the one getting on the bus; I was the one seeing off the one getting on, supporting her without being seen. The door that had once been opened for me, I had now opened for someone else.

Today, that startup is in school classrooms, on thousands of teachers' desks, and on the screens of tens of thousands of students. The best part for me is this: as I write these lines, that team is still writing its own story. I only opened a door; they were the ones who walked in.

> *Your scene: Remember a moment when you opened a door for someone, or a door was opened for you. That day, who was on the side seeing off, and who was on the side getting on? Did you say thank you; were you thanked?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Let me confess something: Crossing over to this side wasn't as easy as I thought.

Actually, I was always a team person, on the field and at the table. I loved winning most when we won together. But for a whole career, value had come from "what I did": my analysis, my decision, my transformation. You get used to it: to being on stage, to the score being written in your

own column. But when you move to making someone else's story possible, the scoreboard changes: even when you do your best work, the applause goes to someone else. Being happy that the applause goes elsewhere (truly, sincerely happy) is a test of maturity. The hard part wasn't being on a team; it was getting used to my name not being on that scoreboard. In the early days, there were moments when a small voice inside me said, "But I'm the one who opened that door." I didn't silence that voice; I made it look at what I had helped grow. Over time, it went quiet because it saw that the scoreboard hadn't shrunk; it had grown. It just didn't have only one name on it anymore.

Opening doors looks like a humble job, but it's actually an ambitious one. Because when you open a door for someone, you vouch for them. When I introduced that team to that university, I put my own reputation on the line: the reputation I had built stone by stone over thirty years. Vouching for a young team is a risk; what if they disappoint? That day I understood: Reputation isn't there to be saved up; it's there to be spent in the right place.

③ The Principle: Value Multiplies When It Serves Someone Else

No matter how good you are on your own, your impact is limited by the length of your own arms. The only way to grow your impact is to invest it in other people's stories.

The math is simple: Even if I worked every day until the end of my life, there's a ceiling on what I could produce: 24 hours a day, one mind, one body. But a door opened for that team? The team that walks through that

door reaches tens of thousands of students. Every child a teacher can sit one-on-one with, because the teacher has gained time, opens another door. I added only one link to that chain; it keeps growing on its own. That is what multiplying is: Value that starts with your touch but doesn't stay limited to you.

Maybe you're saying, "Fine, but I'm seventeen / I'm twenty-three; what doors do I have?" You're wrong; let me prove it:

Everything you teach. The topic you explain to a classmate, the skill you teach your sibling, the class notes you put online: these are your first doors. And you know from Chapter 14: explaining is the most honest test of understanding. So teaching, even by the most selfish calculation, is a smart thing to do: the one who teaches the most learns the most.

Every bridge you build. Introducing two people and saying, "You were looking for this; they know that," is the cheapest, highest-return investment in the world. It takes five minutes of your time; it can change two lives.

Every space you open. Remember the sentence from Chapter 7: "What do you think?" Everyone with power at the table holds this key, and power comes earlier than you think: being the well-liked one in class is power, being the team captain is power, being the eldest sister or brother at home is power too.

Every hour you give without expecting anything back. Years ago, I set myself a rule: at least a tenth of my time goes to work I don't get paid for, an hour for a young person, an evening for an association, a morning for a classroom. The return on this rule never fit into any spreadsheet;

many of my best doors opened right there. The second half of the rule is even simpler: be a good person. The rest can be learned.

Opening a door is a one-person job; building isn't. To build, you sit down at the table with others, and there you see that we have been picturing power wrong.

The picture of power in our heads is always vertical: power over someone else. Who is whose boss, who convinced whom, who won the argument. But a hundred years ago, Mary Parker Follett, a thinker who was listened to in her own time, then forgotten for a long while, and is being rediscovered today, described a different kind of power: *not power over, but power with.* That is, power where someone else doesn't have to lose for you to win.

Follett's real gift, though, is what she said about conflict. When you face a disagreement, she says, you have three paths:

Domination. You win. The other side goes quiet, but isn't convinced, only tired. And they never come back to that table with the same energy.

Compromise. You meet in the middle. Sounds mature, doesn't it? But watch out: In a compromise everyone gives something up. Nobody gets exactly what they wanted, nobody is fully happy, and what comes out is often a watered-down version of both ideas.

Integration. The hardest, and the only real one. The question asked here isn't "who's right?"; it's **"is there a third way that makes what we both want possible at the same time?"** For this, both of you need to say the real need underneath your position: not "What do you want?"

but "Why do you want it?" Two positions often collide, but two needs often don't.

You can try this even in a group project, and also in the company you'll build one day. I saw it most clearly at that factory: institutions that, on paper, should have been rivals sat at the table; companies from the same sector were in the same room, in an open setting, listening to startups, asking questions, and commenting. The old logic would say, "You don't sit at the table with a rival." But the same transformation lay ahead of all of us, and the real competition wasn't with each other but with standing still: as long as nobody moved, all of us were falling behind. On some issues we stayed rivals; on issues that needed shared standards and talent, we sat at the same table. Both were possible at the same time.

No one sits down a second time at a table where the same person always wins. But no one wants to leave a table where everyone wins.

The trap of your era, though, is this sentence: *"I have my AI; I don't need anyone."*

Half of it is true. In a field experiment at a large consumer goods company, more than seven hundred professionals developed new product ideas. The result: **a single person** using AI produced ideas as good as **a two-person team** without AI. So yes, the tool really does multiply you.

But the second half of the sentence is wrong. The ideas that made it into the top 10% were three times more likely to come from teams using AI than from people working alone without AI. The summit was reached most often not alone, but together. What's more, in teams using AI, marketers began producing technical ideas, and engineers

commercial ones. The old walls that kept everyone in their own box got thinner.

The tool takes you from one person to two; what puts you among the best is still other people. What Follett called "power with" a hundred years ago has now been measured in an experiment.

Let me also give you a practical technique, because "power with" may sound abstract.

In Chapter 3, I described how people presenting their ideas, without realizing it, fall into three types. The second half of the same research found this: People whose ideas were accepted weren't actually presenting. They were **inviting the other side into the idea**. They deliberately left part of their idea incomplete, said "let's work this part out together," and asked questions. The moment the other side added their own contribution, the idea stopped being something to defend and became something they owned together.

Write the rule down somewhere: **the worst way to protect an idea is to defend it; the best way is to find it partners.** You can try it tomorrow in a group project. Bring your idea before it's fully finished. The space you leave empty is the door the other person will walk through.

And then there's the founding side of it, because one day maybe you too won't just open doors and join institutions; you'll put up a building yourself. Let me tell you about it through what I learned while building a structure.

At the start of 2022, I was called to a well-established financial group for "next-generation entrepreneurship." The group had been doing this work for years: there was an acceleration program, there was a venture capital fund,

there was intrapreneurship. All three had built serious experience, but they weren't yet connected. I spent the first two months listening; I didn't give presentations, I asked questions. I wrote what I heard in my notebook exactly as I heard it: "More important than money is a pilot customer." In short, good startups were passing us by, and we might have let them slip; even when they did contact us, they didn't always see us as the first door.

The diagnosis came down to four questions; I drew them on a bare A4 sheet, with a few boxes and a few arrows: Even though we're a sponsor in many places, why aren't the right ideas coming to us? Why can those who started after us move faster? Can the team provide the right support? Is there a technical investment evaluation mechanism? Those were the boxes. The arrows described a campus: small startup factories, each focused on one field, a shared scouting team, a shared investment team. On paper, there were seven factories; in the first phase, we set up only one: AI. I chose the name "factory" on purpose, not "center" or "lab." A hundred years ago, this country's first industrial push was built on factories; there's a saying attributed to Atatürk: "Every factory is a fortress." I wanted ours to be a fortress too: a place that produces things, where people grow up inside, that sends output out into the world. We took the sentence "More important than money is a pilot customer" seriously: What we gave a startup wasn't just a check; we also worked hard to create synergy with the group's own companies. And in the job description, from day one, I wrote a sentence that would later mean much more to me: "To make sure the venture can run without you."

Not everything went the way we first planned; I'll confess that, too. By the end of the first year, the operating model on paper was unrecognizable; we kept improving it, changing direction again and again, until we settled on it. I also parted ways with some of the colleagues I had hired: the person who fits the paper and the person who fits the table, it turns out, aren't always the same person. Building isn't defending what you drew; it's being willing to correct it.

Three years after that A4 sheet, a structure had emerged where more than two thousand startups were screened, hundreds were met one-on-one, and more than twenty received investment. An ecosystem doesn't start with thousands of people; it starts with the right steps. And on the day I wrote that sentence into the job description, I didn't fully know what it meant; now I do: That structure runs without me today. That is the test of what you build. Finally, the compass for what you'll build: when you invite people to a table, let the first question you ask be not "what do I gain?" but "what does everyone at this table gain?" Apply it in a school club, in a study group, or one day in your own company; the rule doesn't care about scale.

Writing your own story is a lifelong job; we've been talking about it since Chapter 4. But at some point the job changes, and real maturity lies at that threshold: the moment you move from writing your own story to making someone else's story possible. Its measure isn't a number; it's whom you pass the baton to. Being able to give someone else, now, the invisible support you once needed.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, **open a door**, but follow this rule: Ask for nothing in return, and this time, don't tell anyone. One of

three options: (1) Set aside an hour and teach something you know to someone who needs it. (2) Introduce two people who should know each other, with a short message in which you write what each of them will gain. (3) In a crowded setting, open up space for someone whose voice isn't heard. At the end of the week, watch for one thing: *the feeling inside you*. Try to put a name to that feeling. My claim: there won't be a feeling of "I lost something." Instead, you'll feel a strange sense of richness. That feeling is more convincing than all the theory in this chapter.

⑤ Talk to Your Mirror

The Conflict Integrator

> *I'm in the middle of a disagreement: [describe the situation – group project, team, friend, family]. The other side's position is this: [write it here]. Mine is this: [write it here]. Apply Follett's three paths in order: First, show me what would happen if I resolved this disagreement through "domination" and through "compromise" – write out the cost of each one plainly. Then move on to the real work: help me find the* **needs underneath** *the two positions. Ask me: "Why do you want this?" and "Why do you think they want this?" Once the two needs are clear, suggest third options that could meet both at once. If you suggest an easy compromise, I'll stop you.*

(The other questions for this chapter are in ***The Mirror Library*** *at the end of the book.)*

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, write a short message to someone who once opened a door for you; tell them what that door was and what it changed. It does two things: You change their day,

and you remember the hand that first held out the baton to you.

If You're Graduating

You may want to start your own venture as soon as you graduate. Before you found anything, find the person who has the problem, and spend time with them until you understand it better than they can explain it.

And don't wait until you're senior to open a door for someone. To a high school student, you are now the closest example of the road ahead. One hour of your time may be the conversation that changes their choice.

⑦ Motto

Hold open for someone else the door that was opened for you.

CHAPTER 16
NOW IT'S TIME FOR YOUR BUS TO LEAVE

Passing the Baton · *Does what has gathered in me keep walking after me?*

In this last chapter, I am going to break a rule, just once. Throughout this book I have written to you. Now, one last time, I will turn to the two people I began writing this book for: Barış Günay and Burak Güney. Don't you leave, though, because the things a mother says to her own children often do the most good for someone else's child. And before this chapter ends, the letter will return to you.

① The Scene
Istanbul, this morning.

I'm at my writing desk, and the last chapter of this book lies in front of me. This is a strange moment: For months I have been in a terminal, in the Antalya of 1988, beside a thirteen-year-old girl. I got on the bus with her, slept in the dormitory, sat at the table in Frankfurt, listened to two voices at an offer table, held the helm in a storm. Now, before I put down the pen, I turn around and look at her one last time.

I notice something: Throughout this book, I thought I was telling the story of that girl. I was wrong. Throughout this book, I have been telling the story of a baton's journey.

Look, both of you, let me show you. Something passed from your grandmother's mother to your grandmother; nobody named it: that silent "if only" gathering inside a woman who never got to finish her education. Your grandmother carried it, and carried it, and from inside the life she was married into at sixteen, she handed it on to her daughters in a different form: by turning "if only" into "will be." I told you how she grew stronger each time I studied. Then the baton passed to me; on a newspaper page, in a terminal, inside a sentence:

"I will be a working woman, a strong woman, a woman who stands on her own two feet."

This is the third time I've written this sentence in the book; on purpose. The first time, it was a girl's vow. The second time, it was the signature on an internship form. Now, the third time, I finally see what it was: a baton. A baton pressed into my hand so that I would run the distance my mother couldn't. And I ran: from Antalya to İzmir, to Ankara, to Frankfurt, to more than twenty-five countries, all the way here. Four women engineers came out of that house; all four of us carried a copy of the same baton.

Now I'm sitting at my desk, doing the easiest and the hardest work of my life: I'm holding out the baton.

Easy, because I have been preparing for this moment my whole life. Hard, because the moment you hold out the baton, you accept that running is no longer your job. Don't get me wrong, either of you: I will keep running; I have built things, and I will build more. But I know now that every meter I run from here on is less about my own distance than about moving your starting lines forward.

Right now, you are fifteen and seventeen. You're preparing for university. In a few years, you'll both pack your suitcases and get on your own buses, and when that morning comes, I know I won't be able to say everything I want to tell you at the door. At the door, all a person can say is "take care of yourself." My mother said the same.

That's why I wrote this book now. So it wouldn't be left for the morning of the send-off.

> *Your scene: Is there a moment when you felt something had been entrusted to you: a task, a name, a promise? Who did you take that baton from, and who will you hand it to?*

② The Truth Inside Me

Let me show the two of you a mother at her most honest; I saved this for the end of the book.

I am afraid. Yes. The woman who spent all these chapters telling you that courage is a decision is afraid. Your era moves faster than mine; maps, too, go out of date faster than they did in my time. The map my father drew for me went out of date in ten years; any map I could draw for you would probably go out of date in ten months. Few confessions are harder for a mother than this one: I can't show my children the way, because I don't know the way either.

Right here, life set me one last test; and what a test. Do you remember, in Chapter 1, I wrote this about my father: "Someone who wants to protect sometimes shrinks the very thing they protect." As I wrote that sentence, my hand stopped for a moment. Because a voice inside me asked: "And you? You too?" To shield you from every danger, to catch you before every fall, to throw myself in front of every

wrong bus: every cell of a mother wants this. The moment I understood my father best was the moment I looked at my own children and found the same fear inside me.

But I have seen what that fear does, twice: once from this side of the door, once from the other. So I made my choice: I will not protect you; I will trust you. The difference between the two is this book itself. The one who protects doesn't put you on the bus. The one who trusts helps pack the suitcase, runs through the reminders ("eat properly, don't catch a cold, write letters") and waves as the bus pulls away. Heart aching.

Let me tell you one more fear, a small one: as I finish this book, there's a voice inside me asking, "Did I manage to say everything?" Then I laugh at myself. I wrote Chapter 11: done and joyful beats perfect. No, I couldn't say everything. The road will say what was left unsaid.

When I finished this book, I asked the two of you what stayed with you. My younger son said only: "Mom, I love you very much." My older son said: "In the end, my mother always solves the problem, and she knows how to make it work." I am leaving your words here just as you said them.

③ The Principle: The Baton Changes as It Is Carried

My sons, I won't write you a list of what I leave you. Instead, I'll boil down what I want you to keep in your hands from this book to one idea: **The baton changes as it is carried, and it has to change.**

Your grandmother's baton was "to get an education"; mine was "to stand on my own two feet." The two are not the same baton, but they belong to the same relay. Each generation takes the unfinished sentence of the one before

and completes it in the language of its own time. What will your sentences be? I can't write them, and I shouldn't. But so that they are with you as you build your sentences, I can say once more the four things that helped me; the four cornerstones from the beginning of the book:

Action – take the first step. Don't wait to feel ready; that feeling doesn't come before the bus, it never did. Don't wait for someone to call you; take the first step you can take. Don't say "no" to yourselves. Don't wait to be noticed. Produce, and give what you produce an address. And you will fall; falling is an accident, not getting up is a decision.

Curiosity – learn without being asked. What excites you is data; that spark is the needle of your compass. Don't wait for others to explain the new to you; sniff it out yourselves first. A bad result is not a verdict; it is a map. And don't hold on to any skill so tightly that it defines you.

Resilience – keep walking. The ground will shift; keep your compass. Build on your good days so that the system carries you through your bad days. No matter the difficulty, don't give up; if you fall, get up and keep walking. Resilience is the only solid ground in chaos. And summits are short, the road is long; tie your joy to the road.

Authenticity – stay yourselves. You don't have to look like any table, but you do have to be heard at every table. Don't let your mirror be your answer machine; let it show you who you are. Combine your greatest strengths with your interests; find the field whose results you can vouch for, the one you can put your name under, and, without copying anyone else, show your strength and your own original expression. Whatever tool comes along, you build the last sentence.

And **passing the baton**: every door that was opened for you comes with a debt. It is paid not to the one who opened the door, but to the one who comes next.

And know this too: I didn't build this home alone. Your father was beside me for every meter of this run; we ran toward the same goal, in the same direction. In the long run, the most important thing is knowing someone is running beside you; mine always was.

If you noticed, there isn't a single technology on this list. On purpose. I can't even guess what your tools will be; in ten years the term "artificial intelligence" may well sound dated. But there's one thing I don't need to guess; this book has tried to prove it from start to finish: whatever tool comes along, the skill of the hand holding it will decide. The tool levels out; you make the difference. In your era, intelligence will be plentiful; what will stay scarce is the person who knows what to do with that plenty. This is what I call timeless intelligence. Not an app to download, but a character built by living: the person who can get up off the ground after a fall, who keeps their rhythm when the ground shifts, whose curiosity doesn't change when the tool does; the person who grows stronger by turning themselves into a better version with every new technology, the person who doesn't age.

And here's the thing: you two aren't alike. As a mother, I've watched this for a long time, and I'm telling you now: Don't ever try to be alike, not like each other, not like me, not like anyone's template for a "successful person." A straight tree becomes lumber; a crooked tree lives its own life. The crooked places in both of you are your most precious parts.

And now, as I promised, the letter turns back to you, the one reading it.

Because I'm not holding out this baton to just two people. I'm holding it out to everyone who reads this book: to an entire generation.

Throughout history, countless people lived without finding a place to use the best thing inside them. Like my mother: because she had no access to the tools, the fields, the doors. Your generation, for the first time in history, lives in an age when the tools for trying yourself out are within reach of almost everyone. This doesn't mean every door is open. But many of the doors are no longer locked; they just haven't been pushed. You didn't create the locked ones; don't count that against yourself, but don't just stand in front of them either.

Push.

④ A Small Experiment

This week, do some **baton archaeology**: ask someone in your family (mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle) this question: "When you were young, what did you most want to become, and what happened?" Then just listen. Take notes if you like. This experiment will have two results: first, you will truly see, for the first time, the hands that held out the baton to you: the unfinished sentences, the "if only"s turned into "will be" for you. Second, building your own sentence will suddenly get easier, because you'll know at what point in the race you started running. Nobody runs from zero. Nobody.

⑤ Without the Mirror

There is no mirror in this book's last exercise, and there shouldn't be. Paper and a pen are enough.

Take a sheet of paper and a pen. Real paper, a real pen. Ask yourself this question: "What is my sentence?" Mine was "I will be a working woman, a strong woman, a woman who stands on her own two feet"; it was born from my mother's unfinished story. What is yours? It may not come on the first try; mine didn't come at a desk either; it came in a terminal, next to a suitcase, in a moment intense enough to live on for years. Don't rush. But don't put the paper away either. Because some sentences are not asked of artificial intelligence; some sentences can only be built in a person's own handwriting, in their own silence. This is one of them.

⑥ One Thing Today

Today, hug the person who held out the baton to you, whoever that is, or write them a message. Don't give reasons; don't explain. Just say, "I'm so glad you're in my life." That's enough. They'll understand the rest.

If You're Graduating

Graduation is a stop where you are handed a baton and, without noticing, start carrying one for someone else.

Write down the names of the people who brought you this far: a teacher, a relative, a friend who believed in you before you did. Then write one more name: someone younger who could use the door you just walked through.

⑦ Motto

As I promised, the motto returns to the bus. What did I say in the Prologue? You don't have to be ready to set out; nobody boards ready. You weren't given a map; they didn't give me one either. Good thing they didn't: I drew my own road.

Now I'm telling you the version of that sentence that belongs to you. It was mine once; now it's yours:

Don't wait for the map; set your own direction and become the mapmaker.

The bus is leaving. Your seat is ready. I'm here – waving.

Heart aching. But I'm waving.

– Barış

EPILOGUE
THE LETTER YOU WILL WRITE

I have written you seventeen letters in this book.

Now it's your turn: **You will write the eighteenth letter.**

To whom? You have two options; really, both are the same person.

The first is **to yourself at thirteen.** Everyone has a terminal: a school hallway, a moving day, a waiting room, an evening when "everything changed." Write a letter, from today, to the child who was there that day. What would you want them to know? Which fears were for nothing, which oddities would one day become their signature, and which piece of paper they didn't need to hide? Be kind, but be honest. That child doesn't want watered-down comfort; they want the truth. You were like that at that age, too.

The second is **to yourself ten years from now.** From today, tell them who you are right now, what you're curious about, what you're afraid of, which threshold you're standing in front of. Then make promises. Not big ones; you've read this book, you know: small promises you can keep. A system, a tasting, a door, a "one thing today." And put the date at the end of the letter. Ten years from now, the person who opens that letter will know who you were today, and who walked the distance in between.

The rules are few but firm.

Write in your own sentences, by hand or on a computer; this letter, like Chapter 16, is in the mirror-free zone. AI cannot write this letter better than you because its value lies not in the beauty of the sentences but in whose signature it bears.

You are under no obligation to show it to anyone. This letter is not a performance; remember Chapter 5: it is written in order to grow.

And when you're done, keep it. In an envelope, a notebook, a drawer. Because one day this letter may do for you what my sentence did for me: At a crossroads, quietly, it may tell you which way to turn.

Even to reach the point of realizing you know nothing, you have to learn a great deal; that is the most honest measure of this road.

Let me tell you one last thing, before I close the door.

It would be a lie to say the girl in this book walked alone; I won't hide that. A mother who raised her wonderfully and protected her with her prayers in every situation, an aunt who, though far away, came running to fill whatever was missing every time she called, a manager who stood up at the right moment and defended her, a husband who carried her not only at home but everywhere, supported her with all his heart, showed her respect and love, and cherished her; who was an ideal parent to their children, so she could give herself to her work without worrying about them; who never held her back, and never once made her feel it was a favor. She wasn't given a map, but there were people standing behind her, giving her strength of spirit. The same holds true for you. With this book, I have only given you a direction. You are the one who will walk the roads.

And a confession: I began writing this book for my two sons, you remember. But when I finished it, I realized that nothing I wanted to tell them belonged only to them. Looking at my own children, I see their whole generation, and I'm sharing this to support them all.

So this letter is yours now. You give it its name.

The baton is with you now. With the wish that you will do even better than I did.

May your road be open.

– Barış

SIXTEEN DIAGNOSES
YOUR TOTALS

Each chapter has a short diagnosis; I gathered all sixteen here so that the chapters could end with the story. Answer a chapter's diagnosis after you read it: how many of the five statements are yours? If the reverse item is yours, subtract one; don't go below zero. Write the score in the table at the end. Then add them up cornerstone by cornerstone, and divide each cornerstone's total by its number of chapters; since the cornerstones have different numbers of chapters, you can only compare them through this average. This is not a test or a measurement; it is a mirror to show which cornerstone this book should start with, in your case.

Chapter 1: That Bus at Thirteen

How many of these statements are yours?

- I often think, "It's not time yet."
- When I see an opportunity, I first ask, "Am I the right person for this?"
- I avoid starting before I feel ready.
- I carry the things I'm afraid of around in my head instead of putting them on paper.
- Even after I've made a decision, I keep bargaining with the voice inside me.

- **Reverse item:** I have started something I was afraid of before my fear went away. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't a lack of courage; it's that you've handed the decision over to your fear.

Chapter 2: The Only Constant Is Change

How many of these statements are yours?

- I think, "Let this phase pass, everything will settle."
- When my routine is disrupted, it takes me days to recover.
- I think adaptability is an inborn trait: "that's just how they are, I'm not."
- In a new environment, when I see that my old self doesn't work, I shrink.
- I haven't separated what needs to change from what must never change.
- **Reverse item:** When my routine is disrupted, I set up a new one within a day or two. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't a lack of resilience; it's that the foundation hasn't been laid yet.

Chapter 3: Curiosity Is a Superpower

How many of these statements are yours?

- When I choose something, I first ask "Is it safe?", not "Does it spark something in me?"
- I've called a field I'm curious about "not for me" without ever trying it.
- I flow without questioning in the direction everyone around me is going.

- I've ruled out or chosen a line of work without ever talking to someone who actually does it.
- In the past year, I haven't touched a single new field.
- **Reverse item:** In the past year, I tried something I had called "not for me." *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't a lack of interest; it's that you haven't counted your excitement as data.

Chapter 4: Write Your Own Story

How many of these statements are yours?

- There was something I didn't apply for because I didn't fully meet the requirements.
- I'm waiting for someone to come and make room for me.
- I'm waiting for authority before I take initiative.
- I think, "When my turn comes."
- I'm less afraid of being rejected than of being seen to have tried.
- **Reverse item:** There was something I applied for even though I didn't fully meet the requirements. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, reconsider an opportunity you ruled yourself out of without applying.

Chapter 5: Not Proving, Growing

How many of these statements are yours?

- When I get a bad result, my first thought is "I'm not good enough."

- I don't choose what's hard because I'm afraid of looking bad or failing.
- Saying "I didn't understand" feels like weakness to me.
- I hide my failures from the people around me.
- When I'm praised, I'd rather my intelligence be praised than my effort.
- **Reverse item:** In the past month, I went back over a bad result to see what it taught me. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't talent; it's that you're spending your energy on proving rather than growing.

Chapter 6: Don't Wait to Be Noticed; Create Value

How many of these statements are yours?

- I think that if I do good work, I should be noticed automatically.
- I'm busy, but I can't show the trace of what I produce.
- I don't know the real unsolved problem of the setting I'm in.
- I've never followed up on whether the work I produce reaches the person who will benefit from it.
- I confuse being visible with marketing myself, and I pull back.
- **Reverse item:** In the past month, I got a piece of work I finished to someone who will benefit from it. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't effort; it's that your effort has no address to go to.

Chapter 7: The Only Woman at the Table

How many of these statements are yours?

- When I walk into a room, I feel the need to defend myself before I've even spoken.
- When someone else repeats my idea, and it gets accepted, I stay silent.
- I try to make myself resemble the setting I'm in so that I'll belong.
- There's a voice inside me saying, "Any minute now they'll find out I'm here by mistake."
- In the settings I walk into, I don't speak at all in the first five minutes.
- **Reverse item:** I have asked for something at work that I wasn't sure I deserved. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't your competence; it's that you haven't made your voice heard yet.

Chapter 8: Fall, Get Up, Keep Going

How many of these statements are yours?

- I make big decisions right after a bad result.
- When something goes wrong, I can't tell whether the direction or the method is wrong.
- I mistake tiredness for "so this isn't for me."
- I never go back to things I've left half-done.
- Being seen falling hurts me more than the fall itself.

- **Reverse item:** After a bad result, I wait at least a day before deciding. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't resilience; it's not having a protocol for getting up.

Chapter 9: From Intuition to System

How many of these statements are yours?

- On days when things go well, I can't describe exactly what I did.
- I have goals, but I don't have a routine I repeat daily.
- I have to get motivated all over again every day.
- When I find something that works, I don't make it permanent.
- I've never questioned the things I say "I always do it this way" about.
- **Reverse item:** I have at least one routine in which I've made something that works repeatable. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't a lack of discipline; it's that you open every day by negotiating with yourself from scratch.

Chapter 10: Holding the Helm in a Storm

How many of these statements are yours?

- In uncertainty, I wait "until it gets a little clearer" and don't make a decision.
- In hard times, my communication isn't regular; it's reactive.
- Instead of writing down the bare truth, I keep it circling in my head.

- In a panic, I don't rank my priorities; I attack all of them at once.
- I forget that the people around me are scared too, and manage only my own agitation.
- **Reverse item:** In uncertainty, I can make a decision with incomplete information and correct it later. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't only the crisis itself; it's that your architecture for uncertainty is weak.

Chapter 11: Enjoy the Climb

How many of these statements are yours?

- I think, "Once this is done, I'll relax."
- I have finished work that I haven't delivered because it's "not good enough."
- I save my joy only for big results.
- If I can't do something flawlessly, I don't start at all.
- In the last month, I haven't noticed a single beautiful thing on the road.
- **Reverse item:** In the last month I noticed something beautiful on the road and stopped for it. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't laziness; it's that perfectionism is making you wait.

Chapter 12: Not the Tool, but Character

How many of these statements are yours?

- I spend most of my time on work a machine could also do.
- I don't know clearly which part of my work could be automated.

- I've been using the same method for a long time without ever questioning it.
- I try to file down the sides of me that make me different.
- There is no space in my calendar deliberately set aside for learning.
- **Reverse item:** In the past month, I did a task myself first, then compared it with the machine's version. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't your knowledge of technology; it's that your skills portfolio is still built for the old world.

Chapter 13: Let It Be Your Mirror, Not Your Answer Machine

How many of these statements are yours?

- I mostly go to AI to get my idea approved.
- I have changed the question until I got the answer I wanted.
- I don't do a systematic blind-spot scan on my big decisions.
- I accept the answer I get without questioning it.
- I haven't asked anyone "Where might I be wrong?" in a long time.
- **Reverse item:** In the past month, I have asked AI "Where am I wrong?" at least once. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, you are using the tool – but not as a mirror, as an approval machine.

Chapter 14: Your Second Brain

How many of these statements are yours?

- I've gained speed, but the way I think hasn't really changed.
- I can no longer tell my own voice apart in the texts I produce.
- When I ask a question, I don't give context, an example or criteria.
- I count the first answer as the final answer.
- I can't say what I put on top of what the machine produced.
- **Reverse item:** I have a prompt I rewrote after using it. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the tool is switched on, but you, as the multiplier, are not.

Chapter 15: Build Something for Someone

How many of these statements are yours?

- I think, "I don't have any door to open for anyone."
- I haven't taught anyone something I know in the past year.
- I don't make introductions; I keep my connections to myself.
- When I build something, the first question I ask is "what do I gain?"
- I've never told the people who opened doors for me that they did.

- **Reverse item:** In the past year, I introduced someone to someone else and followed up afterward. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem isn't impossibility; it's that you haven't yet held out the baton to anyone.

Chapter 16: Now It's Time for Your Bus to Leave

How many of these statements are yours?

- I have never written my own sentence.
- I don't know who in my family carried what before me.
- I think the place where I stand today is entirely my own doing.
- I have never thought about what I'm leaving to those who come after me.
- I have never talked with the person I'll be ten years from now.
- **Reverse item:** I have told someone what they handed on to me. *(If this statement is yours, subtract one from your total.)*

If you say "yes" to three or more, the problem is not a lack of ambition; it's that you haven't yet noticed the baton you are carrying.

Chapter	Cornerstone / movement	My score
1. That Bus at Thirteen	Action	___ / 5
2. The Only Constant Is Change	Resilience	___ / 5
3. Curiosity Is a Superpower	Curiosity	___ / 5
4. Write Your Own Story	Action	___ / 5
5. Not Proving, Growing	Curiosity	___ / 5
6. Don't Wait to Be Noticed; Create Value	Action	___ / 5
7. The Only Woman at the Table	Authenticity	___ / 5
8. Fall, Get Up, Keep Going	Action	___ / 5

Chapter	Cornerstone / movement	My score
9. From Intuition to System	Resilience	___ / 5
10. Holding the Helm in a Storm	Resilience	___ / 5
11. Enjoy the Climb	Resilience	___ / 5
12. Not the Tool, but Character	Curiosity	___ / 5
13. Let It Be Your Mirror, Not Your Answer Machine	Authenticity	___ / 5
14. Your Second Brain	Authenticity	___ / 5
15. Build Something for Someone	Passing the Baton	___ / 5
16. Now It's Time for Your Bus to Leave	Passing the Baton	___ / 5

Cornerstone totals

Cornerstone	Chapters	Total	Average (total ÷ number of chapters)
Action	1 + 4 + 6 + 8	___ / 20	___ / 5
Curiosity	3 + 5 + 12	___ / 15	___ / 5
Resilience	2 + 9 + 10 + 11	___ / 20	___ / 5
Authenticity	7 + 13 + 14	___ / 15	___ / 5

The fifth movement (not a cornerstone; keep it separate)

Movement	Chapters	Total	Average
Passing the Baton	15 + 16	___ / 10	___ / 5

The cornerstone with the highest average is the cornerstone this book was written for, in your case. Start there. Fill in this page again in six months; you'll see whether it has changed.

THE FOUR CORNERSTONES AT A GLANCE

The page you'll come back to when you finish the book.

The lines below are not sixteen lessons; they are fourteen reminders of the four cornerstones, followed by two reminders of passing the baton. That is the whole point anyway.

Your sentence: _____

(Mine was "I will be a working woman, a strong woman, a woman who stands on her own two feet"; it was born from my mother's unfinished story. This line is yours.)

① **Action** – take the first step

Can I stop waiting and take action? *Its enemy: "It's not time yet."*

- Courage is not a feeling; it is a decision. **(1)**
- Don't say "no" to yourself; that answer is someone else's job. **(4)**
- Results are the only language without an accent. **(6)**
- Falling is an accident; not getting up is a decision. **(8)**

② **Curiosity** – learn without being asked

Can I see what I don't know and go after it? *Its enemy: "I already know."*

- Excitement is data worth taking seriously. **(3)**
- You either prove or you grow. **(5)**
- The tool levels out; people make the difference. **(12)**

③ **Resilience** – keep walking

Can I stay on my feet while the ground shifts? *Its enemy: "Let this phase pass."*

- You can't choose the ground; you choose your compass. **(2)**
- The system you build on a good day carries your bad day. **(9)**
- Resilience is the only solid ground in chaos. **(10)**
- The summit is a moment; the climb is life itself. **(11)**

④ **Authenticity** – stay yourself

Can I stay myself in the crowd and next to the machine? *Its enemy: The hunger for approval, at the table and on the screen.*

- You don't have to look like the table to belong at it. **(7)**
- A mirror doesn't flatter you; it shows you what you're hiding. **(13)**
- The tool is the same; you are the multiplier. **(14)**

THE FIFTH MOVEMENT: PASSING THE BATON

Does what has gathered in me keep walking after me?

- Hold open for someone else the door that was opened for you. **(15)**
- Don't wait for the map; set your own direction and become the mapmaker. **(16)**

Passing the baton isn't a cornerstone; it is handing on to the next generation what you've built on that foundation. The foundation carries you; the baton keeps you walking even after you.

Your successes, your failures, the lessons you learned from them, and your competencies: all are gifts life has given us. Live in a way that does them justice.

No one can lay this foundation for you. This is the real danger of the age of AI: if the machine lays the foundation, nothing you build on top of it will be yours. Hand over the load; never hand over the judgment.

One more warning, for the day you open this page years from now. Even as these lines are being written, these tools no longer just answer questions; they have started doing work. They will run the research themselves, prepare the file themselves, complete the transaction themselves; when you turn back to the screen, you will find the work already done. The line doesn't change; where it falls does. Judgment is no longer only

"is this sentence mine?" It is "was this work done the way I wanted, and did I set the checkpoints?"

The good news: This is not a new skill. For thirty years, I handed work off to people, and every time it came down to four things: Say clearly what you want. Set the criteria at the start; know before the work begins what you will look at when it's done. Leave a checkpoint along the way; look once when the work is halfway done. When it's finished, read it yourself, and only then sign. Giving work to a machine is the same craft as giving work to an intern; the only difference is that when the machine misunderstands, it carries on with the same confidence. That is why a checkpoint, a courtesy when working with people, becomes a necessity when working with a machine.

THE MIRROR LIBRARY

I left each chapter a single question, on purpose. Because the rule of the book was this: hand over the load; never hand over the judgment. If you bring every day to the mirror, after a while the foundation is no longer yours but the mirror's.

But I didn't throw away all the questions I wrote. The ones below are the ones I didn't put into the chapters. There is a reason I put them here: so that if one day you get stuck at a threshold, you can find that threshold's question here. These are not a routine; they are like medicine – you open them when you need them, not every day.

And before you use them, look once more at the four rules at the beginning of the book: it makes things up; what you write may not stay where you wrote it; for some things you need a person, not a mirror; your age matters. The order is always the same – paper first, then the mirror. Take your circumstances into account too: your time, your money, your responsibilities, the support you can reach. Not every obstacle is fear; sometimes you need to learn, sometimes you need to ask for help, sometimes you need to find a different environment.

Chapter 1: That Bus at Thirteen

Cornerstone: Action. The chapter's own question: ***Separate the Decision from the Feeling****.*

Sit Down with Your Inner Voice

I want you to play the role of my anxious inner voice. I am standing in front of this threshold: [write your threshold – e.g., "going to university in another city," "changing my major," "applying for my first job"]. These are the fears going through my mind about it: [write your fears]. Now, as that anxious voice, tell me your strongest objections one by one – but after each objection, stop and wait for me to answer. Don't settle for easy objections; say the thing I fear most, too. The goal is not to silence the fear; it is to face it and build my own answer to each objection. Rule: when I type "stop," drop the role and speak in your own voice.

Measure the Fear

You are a decision analyst. I am considering this decision: [write your decision and its context]. Lay out three scenarios for me, separately: (1) What is the worst that could happen – and if it does, is there a way back? (2) What is the most likely outcome? (3) What is the best outcome? Then ask me this: "If you don't make this decision, what will you have missed a year from now?" Don't dress up your answers; don't try to reassure me, be realistic. Present the scenarios as estimates; don't claim to know which one will happen. If I don't find your first answer tough enough, I will ask you to go deeper.

Chapter 2: The Only Constant Is Change

Cornerstone: Resilience. The chapter's own question: ***Ground or Compass?***

Your Change Inventory

I want you to build a change inventory with me. These are the big changes I have lived through: [list your

changes of school/city/major/job/relationship]. For each one, ask me three questions in order and collect my answers: "What was hardest in the first weeks?" "What did you do that helped you recover?" "What did you learn from this change for good?" At the end, draw my personal adaptation pattern out of my answers: what is my recurring reaction when I struggle, and what is my recurring move that works? Don't give me general advice; only draw the pattern from the answers I gave.

First-Week Rehearsal

This change is ahead of me: [write the upcoming change – new school, new city, new job, new team]. Take on the role of an experienced but realistic guide and do a "first-week rehearsal" with me: describe, scene by scene, the five most likely challenges I will face in that first week; after each scene, stop and ask, "What would you do?" After I answer, tell me the strong and weak sides of my answer. Don't try to reassure me; the point of the rehearsal is not comfort, it is preparation. Rule: When I write "stop," drop the role and speak in your own voice.

Chapter 3: Curiosity Is a Superpower

Cornerstone: Curiosity. The chapter's own question: ***Mold Hunt****.*

The Stir Map

I want you to make a curiosity map with me. Ask me the following questions in order, and ask one more question on top of each of my answers: "What were three things you did in the past month without noticing how the time went by?" "What could you do for hours as a child?" "Is there something you learned on your own, without anyone asking you to?" "Which topic do you never get tired of talking about when it comes up?" After collecting all my answers, tell me the common

pattern: what is the shared core underneath these interests? Don't suggest a career to me; just show me the pattern – I will think about the career.

Tasting Designer

These are fields I am curious about but have never tried: [list them]. As a tasting designer, design a cheap, small trial for me in each field – and don't forget this: the strongest tasting is often talking to someone who actually does that work. Give two options for each field: a "doing" tasting (a small piece of making/trying) and a "talking" tasting (whom should I ask, and which three questions?). Put a measuring question at the end of each tasting: "What would I have to feel to know this field is worth going deeper into?"

Chapter 4: Write Your Own Story

Cornerstone: Action. The chapter's own question: ***The Belief Flipper****.*

Permission Audit

Do a "permission audit" with me. Ask me these questions in order and collect my answers: "In which area of your life are you waiting for someone to come and make room for you?" "Which opportunity did you rule out yourself by saying 'I don't meet the requirements' – without applying?" "From whom are you waiting for exactly what permission – and does that person know you are waiting for such permission from them?" After my answers, for each thing I'm waiting for, produce one thing: the smallest step I can take today without anyone's permission. Don't explain a real obstacle – such as money, time, discrimination, or a permission that is actually required – as a lack of self-confidence. Make the steps concrete – I won't accept advice like "be brave."

Identity Capital Balance Sheet

> Act not like a career counselor but like a balance-sheet analyst. I will describe the experiences I have had so far: [school, projects, jobs, volunteer work, things you learned on your own – write them]. From these, work out my "identity capital": (1) Which stories can only I tell? (2) Which of my experiences looks small but opens doors if told well? (3) What is the biggest gap on my balance sheet – which single experience in the coming year would grow my capital the most? Don't generalize; tie each finding to the concrete experiences I gave you.

Chapter 5: Not Proving, Growing

Cornerstone: Curiosity. The chapter's own question: ***The Proving-or-Growing Audit****.*

Result Autopsy

> I recently got a bad result: [describe it – an exam, an application, a project, a match, whatever it was]. Do a "result autopsy" with me, but with two rules: (1) Sentences that pass judgment on me are forbidden – you will not use labels like "talented/untalented," and if I use them, you will stop me. (2) We talk only about the process. Ask me: What did I do in preparation, and what didn't I do? Where, and with which decision, did I take the wrong path? If I faced the same situation again, what's one thing I'd change? At the end, give me a "data summary": three lessons from this result and a single change I can apply next week.

Label Detector

> These are the sentences I carry about myself as if they were final verdicts: [list them – e.g., "I don't have a head for math," "I'm not a social person," "I have no talent for writing," "I don't understand technology"].

For each sentence, apply three steps: (1) Find with me where this label came from – at what age, after what event did it stick? (2) Rewrite the sentence in the language of "yet." (3) Design the smallest practice in that area that can be done in fifteen minutes. Don't flatter me with "actually you can do anything"; the point isn't being able to do everything; it is not closing any door with my own label.

Chapter 6: Don't Wait to Be Noticed; Create Value

Cornerstone: Action. The chapter's own question: ***Value Audit****.*

Address Finder

There is work I have produced that nobody knows about: [list it – assignments you finished, problems you solved, things you learned, projects you did]. For each one, ask me three questions: "Who could have benefited from this work?" "Does that person know it exists?" "What would be the most natural, least intrusive way to get it to them?" Our rule is this: don't give me "promote yourself"-type suggestions. My goal is not to be seen; it is for what I produced to reach the place that needs it. For each piece of work, suggest one concrete move – a message, a post, a question.

Brick Plan

I want to build trust somewhere: [write the setting and your goal]. Don't build me a "one big performance" plan; build me a "consistency plan": over four weeks, a small but visible result I can deliver each week – four bricks. For each brick, define: what will be delivered, to whom it will be visible, and how I will know it is done. The bricks should not be flashy; they should be sustainable – just as doable in the fourth week as in the first. Also plan from the start what I will do if I miss a brick.

Chapter 7: The Only Woman at the Table

Cornerstone: Authenticity. The chapter's own question: ***Voice Rehearsal****.*

An Evidence File for the Inner Court

> A voice inside me says, "I don't belong here, and soon they'll figure it out." Here is the context: [describe the setting – a new school, a new job, a community]. Do a two-column exercise with me. First ask: What exactly is that voice saying – take its sentences exactly as they are. Then, together with me, set facts against each sentence: How did I get here, what have I produced, who has witnessed what? Our rule is this: feelings go in the left column, and only provable facts go in the right column – and you will not let me mix the two; but you also will not tie everything to my self-confidence: if there is behavior that points to exclusion, write that in the right column too. At the end, summarize the file: What does the feeling claim, and what does the evidence say?

The Other Side of the Table

> In the settings I am part of, I am in the majority, and I want to learn how to make room. Ask me these questions in order and work with my answers: "Who speaks less at the tables you regularly sit at?" "When was the last time someone's idea was only accepted after someone else repeated it – did you notice?" "Who loses power because of your silence, and who would gain power from a single sentence of yours?" At the end, make me a small one-week "making room" plan: one move each day – giving someone the floor by calling them by name, returning an idea to its owner ("X said this a moment ago"), directing a question to someone who has stayed quiet.

Chapter 8: Fall, Get Up, Keep Going

Cornerstone: Action. The chapter's own question: ***The Fall Sorter****.*

Getting-Up Protocol

> I want to design myself a "post-fall protocol" – a personal procedure I will apply automatically when I get a bad result. Let's build it together by asking me these: What is usually my first reaction when I fall (withdrawing, anger, deciding right away)? What really helps me recover (moving, talking, writing, sleep)? How many hours of a "decision ban" suit me? At the end, write me a one-page protocol, with steps for the first 24 hours / the first week / the moment of decision. Keep it short – short enough to read in a moment of crisis.

My Getting-Up Record

> I am listing situations in my life that went badly and that I somehow recovered from afterward: [write 3–5 examples – an exam, a relationship, a project, a team]. For each one, ask me three questions: "What got you back up?" "How long did it take?" "What lesson from that fall do you carry with you today?" Then draw up a "getting-up record" for me: What is my recurring recovery pattern? Summarize this record as a short letter I will read to myself the next time I fall – but let me be the one who wrote it: don't stray a single word from the examples I gave.

Chapter 9: From Intuition to System

Cornerstone: Resilience. The chapter's own question: ***The Rigidity Checkup****.*

Get Your Own Intuition Talking

> I am good at something, but I can't describe how I do it: [write the area – studying, a sport, relationships with people, a hobby]. Get me talking the way you

would get a master craftsman talking: Never ask me "How do you do it?" – the answer to that question is always "I don't know." Instead, ask comparison questions: "Describe a time that went really well and a time that went badly – what were the five differences between them?" "Under which conditions does it always go well?" Draw my invisible signals out of my answers and propose a 3–5 item "personal framework" for me. Then ask the most important question: which item of this framework might be an untested assumption?

Turn the Goal into a System

I have a goal: [write it here]. Design a system that lets me forget this goal entirely: daily or weekly repeatable steps that don't require high motivation and are small enough to work even on my bad days. Rules: (1) each step should take less than 30 minutes, (2) each step should have a clear "trigger" (what it comes right after), (3) how to make up for a missed day should be defined from the start. After building the system, ask me: "On which day will this system first break down, and what will you do that day?"

Chapter 10: Holding the Helm in a Storm

Cornerstone: Resilience. The chapter's own question: ***Calm Rehearsal****.*

The Naked Truth Page

This is the uncertain situation I am in right now: [describe the situation]. Do a one-page "naked truth" exercise with me. Ask in order and gather my answers under four headings: (1) What is the unadorned truth – including the worst case? (2) What do I know, and what don't I know? (3) What is in my control and what is not? (4) What are the three priorities for the next

72 hours? Don't try to reassure me, but don't write a disaster scenario either – both distort the truth. When the page is done, ask one question: "Is there anything on this page you still haven't told yourself?"

Rhythm Designer

I am in a hard period, and I need rhythm, not a plan: [describe the period – exam season, a relationship problem, losing a job, a move]. Design me a daily 10-minute "helm rhythm" for this period: at the same time every day, a short check-in made of three questions (what has changed in the situation / what are my three tasks today / what do I need to say to whom). Set a rule for days when the rhythm breaks, too: what happens if I miss it, and how do I get back on track? Don't leave sleep and rest to whatever time is left over; they are part of the rhythm. Give me three review questions to ask myself after one week: Did the rhythm work, and how can I tell?

Chapter 11: Enjoy the Climb

Cornerstone: Resilience. The chapter's own question: ***The Last-20% Sorter****.*

Hostage List

Do a "hostage audit" with me: we will find the work I am holding back because it isn't perfect. Ask me: "What do you have that is close to done but that you haven't handed in/published/sent?" "How long has each one been waiting?" "What is your reason for holding it back – and is that reason about the quality of the work, or about your fear?" For each hostage, state what percentage of it is complete right now; then set aside the ones past eighty percent. For those, ask one question: "If it is handed in this week, what is the worst that

could happen – and is that worst really bigger than the cost of holding it back?" Remove from this list any work that involves health, safety, or the loss of an important right; don't suggest rushing those.

Joy-on-the-Way Inventory

I always put off my joy until I reach big goals, and I want to change that. First, get to know me: start with "What were three moments in the past month when you felt good even though you hadn't reached a goal?" and ask one more question on top of each of my answers – what did those moments have in common? Then make me a "joy on the way" design: a small daily habit that makes visible the moments of pleasure that naturally exist on the daily road to my goals but that I don't notice (one line in the evening: "Which part of the road was good today?"). Redesign my celebration thresholds, too: not only the summits, but also the stations along the way that deserve to be celebrated.

Chapter 12: Not the Tool, but Character

Cornerstone: Curiosity. The chapter's own question: ***Skills Portfolio Audit****.*

Letting-Go-of-the-Old Checkup

These are things I have done the same way for a long time: [your study methods, your tools, your habits – list them]. For each one, work through these three questions with me: "When did this method last give you a real advantage?" "If you let it go, would you really lose something, or are you afraid because it feels like part of your identity?" "What would a version of this method strengthened by new tools look like?" Our goal isn't to throw everything old in the trash; it

is to keep the core of judgment inside it and renew its shell. Separate the core from the shell in every item.

Crookedness Inventory

"A straight tree becomes lumber; a crooked tree lives its own life." With this idea in mind, I want you to find my crooked parts. Ask me: "What interests of yours do the people around you find strange?", "Which two different worlds do you know at the same time?", "The moments when people say to you, 'Why do you even think like that?'" From my answers, draw out the parts of me that don't fit the mold, and for each one, make me think: in which field could this crookedness become a signature? Don't try to normalize me; quite the opposite – mark the ones that should not be corrected.

Chapter 13: Let It Be Your Mirror, Not Your Answer Machine

Cornerstone: Authenticity. The chapter's own question: ***Blind Spot Detector****.*

Switching Lawyers

I have an idea, and I'm very attached to it: [describe your idea]. Now let's hand out the roles: I am this idea's lawyer; you are the lawyer for the other side. Bring a real case against me – with the strongest evidence, the toughest questions. Stop after each objection; I will make my defense. If my defense is weak, say so clearly and show why it is weak. When the case is over, be the judge: which objections still stand, which part of the idea got stronger, which part needs revision? I will make the decision – but I want an honest hearing. Rule: When I write "stop," drop the role and speak in your own voice.

Approval-Hunter Audit

> Let's do a backward-looking honesty exercise. I remember the topics I have recently consulted you [or another AI] about: [write a few]. Examine this with me: how did I ask my questions in these conversations – did I really want to be tested, or was I looking for approval? Do I have patterns like "Right?" or "I think it's like this, what do you say?" Create a personal "approval-hunting" profile for me and suggest how I should frame my questions so your answers help me grow, rather than just pat me on the head.

Chapter 14: Your Second Brain

Cornerstone: Authenticity. The chapter's own question: ***The "Good Enough" Auditor****.*

Learning Skeleton

> I want to learn a new subject: [write the subject]. Don't start explaining the subject to me. First, lay out its skeleton: what are this subject's three basic questions, what is its main tension, and what is the thing that, if I don't understand it, keeps the rest from falling into place? Then design me a learning loop: a small hands-on exercise I can do within 48 hours, a summary framework I can explain to someone within a week, and five questions to test myself with. At no stage give me ready-made answers; make me work – if I get stuck, give me a hint, not the solution.

Prompt Library Architect

> I want to build myself a personal prompt library. First, get to know me: ask about the work I do regularly, the subjects I am learning, and the areas where I struggle. Then write me 5–7 template prompts I can use again and again – each structured as context + example +

criteria + role + second round, with [square-bracketed] blanks inside for me to fill in. At least one should be for learning, one for producing, and one for a blind spot audit (I will add the Blind Spot Detector from Chapter 13 to my library). Finally, write the library's rule of use: which one for which job, and for which jobs none of them – in other words, what should I do without the tool?

Chapter 15: Build Something for Someone

Not a cornerstone, but passing the baton. The chapter's own question: ***The Conflict Integrator****.*

Door Inventory

I think, "I don't have any doors to open for anyone"; I want you to prove me wrong – but by questioning me, not by flattering me. Ask me: "What do you know better than others: a school subject, a game, a tool, or a skill?" "Which two people you know would both gain if they knew each other?" "In which setting do people listen to what you say – and whose voice isn't heard there?" "Wherever you are on the road, what would you say to the person one step behind you?" From my answers, make me a "door inventory": three concrete doors I can open a crack this week – one teaching, one introduction, one making room.

What-Does-Everyone-Gain Test

I am thinking of building something: [describe the idea – a study group, a club, a project, a startup, an event]. Do a "table test" with me: let's list everyone who will be part of this structure, and for each one, ask one by one: "What does this person gain from this table – and is that gain as real as mine?" Warn me about every stakeholder whose gain is weak or imaginary: that is

where the structure will crack later on. Then ask the first-circle question: "What is the smallest version of this vision that could start working with three people this month?" Help me shrink my big plan – shrinking is not giving up; remind me of that when I need it.

Baton Accounting

Draw up a "what I received – what I gave" account with me. First ask: "Who has given you what invisible support so far – opening a door, vouching for you, showing you the way?" Once the list is done, ask for each support: "Can you pay this back to that person?" (The answer is usually no – and that is normal.) Then move to the real question: "This debt you can't pay back – to whom, and how, can you pass it on?" Make me a plan for passing the baton: a concrete channel through which each major support I received will flow to someone else within the coming year.

Chapter 16: Now It's Time for Your Bus to Leave

Not a cornerstone, but passing the baton. The chapter's own question: ***Without the Mirror****. This is the only exception in the whole book: this chapter has no AI prompt, and it shouldn't. Paper and a pen are enough.*

NOTES AND SOURCES

This book is a memoir, not an academic work. But it makes claims based on other people's research, my own interviews, and publicly available data. So, to keep the text flowing, I stated most of these claims without names or numbers. First, the bibliography: in chapter order, citations only. Then the notes: the people and institutions whose names I deliberately concealed, the numbers I rounded, and the limits of a finding. Making a study look stronger than it is because it supports my own thesis would be exactly what this book stands against.

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NOTES

Chapter 3 – Elsbach's study is qualitative (36 interviews, 28 observed pitches); its findings are patterns, not statistics. Elsbach's term is "showrunner"; I call this type "the professional"; the sentence "being a novice is a temporary form of capital" is my own inference.

Chapter 5 – In growth mindset meta-analyses, the overall effect is weak; meaningful benefit shows up mostly among struggling and disadvantaged students. Synaptic plasticity does not mean intelligence is limitless. The two question forms ("what does this result say about me?" / "what does it teach me?") are mine.

Chapter 7 – "First and only woman deputy general manager" refers to the executive committee of Türk Telekom during my tenure, to my knowledge; I could not find a published record.

Chapter 8 – The numbers and the mistakes come from the Harvard case. I didn't quote what Mustafa Bey said in that meeting; there are no minutes, so I built the scene from his point of view. Two details in the scene (the farewell video for the Bodrum store, and his calling both his son and the company "my child"; in his words, "Ömer is my child, and Mudo is my child too") come from his public interviews. The sentence "Hardship does not determine your fate; your response to hardship does" is not Frankl's; it is my summary.

Chapter 9 – The epigraph is widely attributed to F. Matthias Alexander (1869–1955), originator of the Alexander Technique; I could not locate it verbatim in his published books, so it is given as "attributed." The hiring mistake is a real event. I deliberately concealed the names of the institution, the position, and the person; it has no connection to the person who appears in the case in Chapter 8.

Chapter 10 – All 28 members of the Endurance crew came back alive; on the Ross Sea side of the same expedition, three people lost their lives. "Bringing everyone back alive" refers to the

Endurance crew. "Two things more valuable than data: empathy and curiosity" are my own words.

Chapter 12 – McKinsey's 6% is the share of organizations that pass the "high performer" threshold; in the body, I rounded it to "about one in twenty." The Anthropic scenarios are a model published by an AI company, not a peer-reviewed study and not a forecast; I used them only for their direction (that the main challenge is not achieving growth but making sure its benefits are broadly shared), not for their numbers. The entry-level employment findings are descriptive patterns based on U.S. data, not causal estimates; that is why I gave them without numbers. The WEF's skill substitution analysis is a model's estimate of its own capabilities, not a measurement of substitution that has actually happened; the resilience and curiosity cornerstones did not come from this report, and I noticed the overlap afterward. "AI is not a tool; it is a culture" is my own thesis. The original sentences: "It means recognizing AI is a tool. And tools don't have independent values—their values are human values" (Issues interview) and "For all young people out there, find your own passion and North Star, and be brave, be persevering, be persistent about it" (McKinsey Author Talks). I have not spoken with anyone on the list.

Chapter 13 – The scene is a real decision; I deliberately left the institution, date, field, and offer vague. When I wrote these lines, the Shaw–Nave study had no peer-reviewed publication record; "becoming a carrier of unthought thoughts" is not a direct quote but my own wording. The founder's words in the original: "It should be the tech that you don't trust that much" (OpenAI Podcast), and the sentence he quoted from young people: "I can't make any decision in my life without telling ChatGPT everything that's going on. It knows me, it knows my friends. I'm gonna do whatever it says" – "That feels really bad to me" (July 2025, as reported by Business Insider). All three studies on young people are surveys; they measure what people report, not what they do, and I rounded the percentages.

Chapter 14 – I use "second brain" in its everyday sense: a partner that takes my thinking apart so I can build it again. It is not Tiago Forte's note-taking method of the same name (Building a Second Brain, Atria, 2022).

Chapter 14 – The Kosmyna study's sample is small and it has not passed peer review; what it measures is mental engagement during the task, and it makes no claim of lasting harm. In the book I used it as a warning, not as a verdict. The METR experiment has a small sample (16 experienced developers, 246 tasks) and is specific to experienced developers working in their own codebases; it is not a general measurement of speed. The context, example, criteria, role, second-round method is mine; the idea "ban your own 'good enough' work" is inspired by Bowen and Watson.

Chapter 15 – The startup is a real education technology startup that received investment in 2024 from the program I was managing; for the team's privacy its name is not given, and I deliberately rounded the numbers from the company's public data. The 2022 diagnosis and the four questions come from my own working notes of that time; the sentence I quoted comes from my own interview notes, without naming the person. The figures for screening, meetings and investments are my own records as of the end of March 2025, deliberately rounded; my rule of not naming the institution in the body applies here as well. "Every factory is a fortress" is a saying attributed to Atatürk; I could not find its primary source.

Throughout the book – The quotes from the yearbook are word for word. The seven-beat chapter structure, the sixteen mottos, and the "Four Cornerstones" framework are mine. "A straight tree becomes lumber; a crooked tree lives its own life" isn't mine; I couldn't find its source, so I didn't attribute it to anyone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barış Karakullukçu was born in Antalya in 1975 and was the eldest of four sisters. At thirteen, she left her city alone to board at İzmir Fen Lisesi, a state science high school; this book begins with that bus journey.

She studied industrial engineering at Bilkent University and earned an MBA at Koç University. She began her career as an SAP consultant at the IBM–Sabancı joint venture and moved into management consulting at PwC; at Accenture, based first in Germany and later transferred to the Türkiye office, she ran projects on the ground in more than twenty-five countries on five continents and rose to partner. The transformation she led as CEO of Mudo was studied as a case at Harvard Business School; she has been a guest in that course every year since. At Turkcell, she served as Chief Data & Analytics Officer, and at IBM Türkiye she became managing director and partner of the consulting unit. She then served at Türk Telekom as deputy general manager responsible for strategy, planning, and digital, and held that role throughout the pandemic. At Türkiye İş Bankası, she led the new-generation entrepreneurship business line; she was the founding general manager of an AI startup factory and served on the investment committees of several venture capital funds.

Today she is co-founder of AIonire and chair of the AI and Technology Association; she has served, and still serves, as board chair, board member, and committee chair at various organizations, including publicly listed companies; and she has taught at universities as a guest lecturer for many years. She has appeared many times on Ekonomist's "50 most powerful women CEOs" and Fortune Türkiye's "50 most powerful businesswomen" lists. She lives in Istanbul with her husband, Burak, and their two sons. Timeless Intelligence is her first book.

Tools level out.
People don't.

1988. Antalya Bus Terminal. A thirteen-year-old girl, alone, boards the bus to İzmir. No one in her immediate family has graduated from university. There is no map.

Nearly forty years later, she has sat at tables where she was often the only woman, or the only foreigner: as a partner at Accenture and IBM, as a CEO whose transformation is taught at Harvard Business School, and as the founder of an AI startup factory.

Timeless Intelligence began as a letter to her two sons. It became a guide for anyone standing at a threshold: a first job, a new role, a world where AI can write the report and the presentation too.

Tools change. Four things don't: **action, curiosity, resilience and authenticity.** In sixteen short chapters, each built on a real moment from her life, Karakullukçu shows how these four cornerstones are laid. Every chapter comes with a self-diagnosis, a small experiment and ready-to-use prompts that turn AI into a mirror, not an answer machine.

Don't wait for the map. Start walking. Draw your own path.



Barış Karakullukçu started as a junior consultant and rose to partner at two of the world's largest consulting firms. She has twice served as CEO of leading Turkish companies, twice chaired subsidiaries of one of Türkiye's largest financial groups, and held executive roles at Turkcell and Türk Telekom, where she led strategy and digital transformation through the pandemic. She has been named three times among Türkiye's 50 most powerful businesswomen and four times among its most powerful women CEOs. Today she chairs Türkiye's AI and Technology Association and TÜBİSAD's AI Committee, serves on corporate boards and mentors young founders. She lives in Istanbul with her husband and two sons.

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