

Preface

I wrote this book because a particular kind of unhappiness kept showing up in lives that were not, on paper, in trouble.

The person had done a reasonable amount of what they were asked to do. They had not, as far as I could tell, been idle. They still spoke as if they were behind. They said it the way people say a temperature. As if the shortfall were a fact about them.

Nobody needed to be cruel for the word to land. It landed because it was already in the language. It was already a way of sitting with a year.

I have watched that feeling in people who are kind, and employed, and tired of explaining their year. I have watched it in people whose year did not need explaining until someone asked. A loss could look like a verdict and still produce the same sentence. I have

felt a version of it myself, which is not the same as making this book about me. I got tired of watching the feeling treated as a private defect. I started paying attention to the stories around it.

This is not a method. I do not have a better timetable to hand you in place of the one that is already making you flinch. There is no list at the back. I am not offering my résumé as a proof, or a set of steps that will make a life behave. If you want a sequence that guarantees a rise, you already know where those books live.

What I have is stories. Real ones. People, companies, stretches of years that do not agree with one another. Some will look like a rise. Some will not. I am keeping both. I did not collect them to prove a single point. A single point would have required me to drop the ones that refused it. I came to keep the disagreement.

I should say the other thing early, before the later pages can be mistaken for a delayed consolation.

Some failures stay.

A person can do the work and still not receive the later year that would make the work a prelude. An ending can be an ending. I am leaving that fact standing, including here. If you need every loss to be a beginning that has not admitted itself, this is the wrong door.

I don't know what your next stretch will be. I don't know mine. I wrote anyway, because the feeling is common, and the books that usually greet it are either a cheer or a despair. I wanted a third thing. Kindness, here, is the decision not to console you with a sentence the rest of the book would have to take back.