

AGES 9 – 14

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Free Men Tell the Truth

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CHAPTER 17 · FREE MEN TELL THE TRUTH

The Assembly

A story about the cost of silence and the price of speaking

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At the school assembly, the teacher asked who had broken the window in the science corridor.

Thirty-two students looked at the floor.

Leonor knew who had done it. She had been there. It wasn't malicious — a football had gone badly wrong, a window had shattered, and the two boys responsible had looked at each other in the second after it happened and walked away very quickly without saying a word.

She had walked away too.

Now she was sitting in the assembly hall with the others, looking at the same floor, and she could feel the silence like a physical thing pressing on her chest.

The teacher said that no one was in serious trouble — these things happened, windows could be replaced — but that it mattered, for the school to work, for them to trust each other, that when something happened the people who knew about it said so.

Leonor thought about her two friends who had kicked the ball. She thought about how they would feel if she spoke. She thought about how she would feel if she didn't.

She thought about something her father had said once, not to her, but to someone on the phone, not knowing she could hear. He had been talking about a problem at work, about a colleague who had done something wrong and whether to report it. *Free people tell the truth,* her father had said. *That's one of the things freedom means.*

She'd thought about that sentence a lot since. She'd never been sure she fully understood it until now.

She raised her hand.

Thirty-two heads turned. A few of them looked impressed. A few looked worried on her behalf. One of the boys who had broken the window looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite read.

"I know what happened," she said.

It was three seconds of her life. Three seconds and a raised hand. Afterward, when the assembly was over and the teacher had spoken to the boys — who turned out to be fine, who got a lecture and nothing more — Leonor walked out into the corridor feeling lighter than she had in three days.

The boy whose window-breaking had started it all fell into step beside her.

"I was going to say something," he said.

"I know," she said. She thought she probably did know, actually.

"Thanks," he said. Then he went off to class.

Leonor thought about her father's sentence all the way home. *Free people tell the truth.* She thought she understood it better now.

It wasn't that truth was easy. It was that silence, when you knew something, was its own kind of cage.

*Speaking the truth is not always comfortable. But it is almost
always the thing that lets you sleep.*

N O I R A C I E L

A companion to “Free Men Tell the Truth”

Contributions help fund The Invisible Roots Scholarship —
supporting students who carry invisible roots.

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