

FROM ROLE TO IDENTITY

A Journey of Becoming



Hameem Abdul Qadeer

Everyday Jewels Media Enterprise

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FROM ROLE TO IDENTITY

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TWO-CHAPTER EXCERPT

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The Uniform Was Never You

Identity beneath the role

CHAPTER 2

Before the Number, There Was a Name

Reclaiming the self before the system

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The Uniform Was Never You

Identity beneath the role

Before I say anything else, I want you to know something.

I see you.

Not the version of you that learned to walk into a room like you owned nothing and expected nothing. Not the version that got good at reading threats, reading exits, reading faces. Not the number they gave you, the charge they filed, or the risk level they assigned.

I see the one who is still in there.

That person never left. They got buried. They got quieted. They learned when to disappear. But they didn't go anywhere.

This chapter is about finding them again — not as a reward for surviving, not as some inspirational redemption arc — but as the most practical, necessary work you can do right now. Because until you separate who you were assigned to be from who you actually are, you will keep building your future on someone else's blueprint.

And that is not building. That is just obeying in a different setting.

The justice system is not designed to understand you. That is not an accusation — it is a structural fact. Systems are built for efficiency, not for complexity. And a full human being is the most complex thing in existence.

So what systems do — all systems, not just criminal justice — is reduce.

They take the whole of you and find the part that fits the form. Your name becomes a number. Your history becomes a charge. Your needs become a classification. Your entire self gets compressed into whatever function makes you manageable inside that structure.

This is not accidental. It is the mechanism.

And before you ever stepped inside a courtroom or a facility, this mechanism had already been running on you for years.

The schools that tracked you into remedial classes before they knew your name. The streets that had a role waiting for you before you understood what you were stepping into. The family systems shaped by trauma and poverty and survival — systems that needed you to be the tough one, the quiet one, the one who didn't ask questions. The child welfare systems, the juvenile facilities, the group homes. Every institution you passed through handed you a costume and expected you to wear it without complaint.

And most of the time, you did — because that was the smart move. Because adaptation is survival. Because you were doing what any intelligent person does inside a system that holds power over them: you performed the role well enough to protect yourself.

But here is what no one told you when all that was happening: Performing a role is not the same as becoming one.

Think about what you were wearing — not literally, though that too — but what you put on every day in order to move through whatever world you were in.

In the street, maybe it was the mask of someone who was never scared, never soft, never hesitating. The walk. The stillness. The flat affect that told people you were not someone to test. You

built that. You maintained it with discipline. And it worked — which is why you kept it.

Inside, maybe it was a different kind of mask. The one that showed nothing to COs, showed nothing to other inmates, that kept your actual thoughts private because privacy was the only thing you still had. You learned fast that vulnerability was currency — and if you spent it wrong, it cost you.

Before all of that, when you were a child — you had an even earlier costume. Whatever your home required of you. Whatever role made the adults in your life functional enough to get through the day.

I am not asking you to condemn any of those versions of yourself.

Those masks were not weakness. They were intelligence. They were protection. You built them because you needed them, and that is not something to be ashamed of.

What I am asking you to do is look underneath them.

Because here is what I know: underneath every one of those performances, something stayed intact. I know this not as theory but as lived fact. The system got my body, my time, my freedom of movement, my access to my family. It got years I will never recover.

It did not get the thing that was asking questions in the dark. It did not get the part of me that was watching everything and storing it and drawing conclusions. It did not get the voice inside that kept saying this is not who I am, this is not where I end.

That voice was mine. It had been mine from the beginning.

You have that voice too.

The question is whether you've been listening to it — or whether you've been letting louder voices drown it out for so

long that you've stopped trusting it.

There is a particular moment that a lot of people who've been inside can recognize, even if they never named it.

It usually doesn't happen in a dramatic scene. It doesn't come with an announcement.

It comes in something ordinary. Maybe you are sitting at a table doing nothing — waiting for count, or for a meal, or for a meeting that was supposed to start twenty minutes ago. Maybe you are in a housing unit that smells like every housing unit you have ever been in. Maybe it is early, and the light coming in is the flat gray kind that belongs to no particular time of year.

And for a second, just a second, you look down at what you are wearing.

And something shifts.

Not anger. Not grief. Something quieter than both of those.

It is the recognition that this — the number on your chest, the color on your back, the tag on your bed — describes where you are. It says nothing about who you are.

These clothes were waiting here before you arrived. They will be here after you leave. A thousand people wore them before you. A thousand people will wear them after. The garment was never built with you in mind. It was built for function, for identification, for the management of a population.

It is a costume.

And in that quiet moment, you feel the distance between the costume and the self — maybe for the first time with any clarity. Maybe for the first time since everything started.

That distance is everything.

That space between the assigned identity and the actual one — that gap is where your reconstruction begins.

Here is the part I need you to sit with, because this is where most people get stuck.

The danger is not when other people define you.

The danger is when you start agreeing with them.

This is not weakness. This is what happens to human beings under sustained institutional pressure. When you are told the same thing about yourself long enough, in enough different forms, by enough different voices with enough power over your circumstances — your brain begins to accept it as data about who you are.

You stop fighting the label and start inhabiting it.

It shows up quietly. You don't expect anything different so you don't ask for it. You shrink your ambitions to fit what seems possible for someone like you. You explain yourself with their language — I'm just a felon, I'm just a former inmate, I've got a record — as if those words are the whole story and not just one line of it.

You start making decisions based on what someone with your history is supposed to deserve.

This is called internalized criminalization, and I am not using that phrase to sound academic. I am using it because it is precise. It describes the specific thing that happens when a system's judgment of you becomes your own judgment of yourself.

And it is the first wall you will hit when you try to build something new.

Not the background check. Not the housing application. Not the employer who takes one look at the box you checked and closes the folder.

Those are real obstacles. We will deal with them.

But this one — the one inside your own thinking — this one has to come down first. Because if you carry their definition of you into every room you walk into, you will negotiate against yourself before anyone else gets a chance to.

You will do their work for them.

I did this. For longer than I want to admit, I carried a version of myself that was built from other people's assessments. I moved like someone who expected doors to close. I kept my expectations low because low expectations protect you from certain kinds of pain. And I called that wisdom.

It was not wisdom.

It was survival strategy dressed up as self-knowledge. And there is a difference.

Your incarceration was a chapter in your story.

It was not the title.

Read that again. Not because it sounds good — because it is structurally, factually true. A chapter is a portion of a larger text. It has weight, it has consequence, it changes what comes after it. I am not telling you to minimize what you went through or pretend it didn't shape you.

It shaped you.

But shaping is not the same as defining. The sculptor's hands shape the clay, but the sculptor is not the clay.

The uniform they gave you described your circumstances on a specific set of dates in a specific institutional context. That is all it did. It was not a portrait of your character. It was not a verdict on your worth. It was not a forecast of your future.

It was a costume. Functional, institutional, temporary.

You are not temporary.

You arrived in this world with a particular set of capacities, curiosities, instincts, and ways of seeing. Some of those got bent under pressure. Some got refined under pressure — because pressure does both things, depending on the material. Some got buried so deep you have forgotten they exist.

They exist.

The work of this book — and of the life you are in the process of building — is not about becoming someone new. That framing is wrong, and it will exhaust you. You cannot become someone new. You are not blank.

The work is about excavation.

Digging down past the accumulated weight of other people's definitions until you hit something solid that is yours. Something no institution ever touched. Something that survived.

That is your foundation.

That is what you build from.

This is not a worksheet. I don't have patience for worksheets. This is an audit. It is the kind of thing you do when you are serious about knowing what you are working with before you start building.

You need paper. Not a screen — paper. A pen. Find somewhere you can be honest without performing anything for anyone.

You are going to write down three labels. Not general categories — specific labels. The kind that live in your chest. The ones that surface when someone asks you to describe yourself, or when you walk into a new situation, or when you lie awake at three in the morning being honest with yourself.

Labels that were assigned to you by:

- The system (a charge, a classification, a file designation) - The street (a reputation, a role in someone else's operation, a name people gave you) - Your family (the one who was always in trouble, the one who couldn't be counted on, the one who was never going to amount to anything) - Your own internal voice (the story you tell yourself quietly, that you would not say out loud to most people) On the left side of the paper, write the label exactly as it lives in you. Not sanitized. Not hedged. The real version of it.

On the right side, write one sentence that tells the truth about where that label came from. Not what it says about you — where it came from. Who assigned it. What circumstance produced it. What institution, what street, what voice, what moment put that word on you.

Then — and this is the part that matters — draw a single line through it.

Not because you are pretending it never existed. Not because you are erasing history. But because you are marking the moment you stopped accepting someone else's assessment as the final word on who you are.

This is the beginning of your construction project.

Not the application. Not the program. Not the certificate. This moment, on this paper, with this pen.

The uniform was never you.

It was always just something you were made to wear.

Take it off.

Chapter 2: Before the Number, There Was a Name

Before the Number, There Was a Name

Reclaiming the self before the system

You just drew a line through three labels.

Maybe your hand hesitated. Maybe it didn't. Maybe you crossed them out hard — a single stroke — and felt something shift. Maybe you sat there and stared at the page afterward, at what was left. The white space where those words used to be the whole explanation of you.

Good. Stay in that space for a minute.

Because here is the question this chapter asks: what was there before any of those words existed? Before the charge, before the conviction, before the classification and the case number and the housing unit and the tier? Before you were reduced to a function someone else needed you to perform?

There was a name.

Your name. The one your mother said when she was calling you to dinner. The one your grandmother used when she was telling a story about you to someone who hadn't met you yet, her voice going soft or proud or both. The one written in your school folder. The one that, for at least some portion of your life, meant you — not your history, not your charge, not your compliance level. Just you.

This chapter is about going back to get it.

There is a moment on the day of your arrest — or maybe it's the day of booking, or the day you're transferred to a facility — when something happens that nobody announces out loud. It

happens in the middle of other things. People are giving you instructions. You are trying to follow them. You are trying not to show fear. And in the middle of all of that, quietly, the transaction occurs.

Your name is replaced by a number.

Your clothes are replaced by a uniform.

Your choices are replaced by a schedule.

None of this happens violently. That's what makes it so effective. It happens procedurally. It happens in a tone of voice that implies this is just the way things work, and the implication is correct, because it is. You are processed. That's the word. And processing means the system needs a way to track you, manage you, account for you, move you. A name doesn't help with that. A name is particular. A name is personal. A name implies a story. A number is clean.

I am not saying the people doing intake are trying to break you. Some of them are. Most of them are not thinking about you that way at all. They are doing their job. That is, in some ways, the more important thing to understand. You were not singled out. You were processed. The machine wasn't designed to destroy your identity. It was designed to be indifferent to it. And indifference, over time, does more damage than malice.

Because here is what happens when you hear your number instead of your name for months. Then a year. Then three years. Then longer. You start to organize yourself around it. You learn to respond to it without thinking. You stop flinching at it. You carry it in your ID, in your commissary, in your medical file. You are called by it in front of other people and you answer and no one thinks anything of it, including you, because that's just how it works here. And somewhere in the accumulation of all of those

moments, a shift occurs that is subtle enough that you might not catch it when it happens.

You stop hearing your name the way you used to.

Not because you forgot it. But because it stopped feeling real. The number is what gets results in this environment. The number is what the officer responds to. The number is what appears on every document. The number has power here. Your name — the one your mother gave you — doesn't produce anything in this context. And human beings are adaptive. We stop reaching for tools that don't work.

That adaptation keeps you functional inside. It costs you something real.

There is a scene that a lot of people coming home describe without realizing they all describe the same thing.

You are out. You have your property in a bag, or your paperwork, or whatever they handed you on the way through the door. You are somewhere in the world — a parking lot, a bus stop, a sidewalk outside a building you spent years trying to leave. And someone who knows you walks up. A family member. A case manager. A volunteer who picked you up. And they say your name.

Not your last name barked in a hallway. Your name. The one people who love you use.

And something happens in your chest that you don't have a clean word for.

It doesn't feel like relief, exactly. It feels more like disorientation — like hearing a song you haven't heard in years and suddenly you are twelve years old again, standing in a kitchen you haven't thought about in a long time. The name

sounds different outside. The acoustics aren't the same. You're used to your name bouncing off concrete and steel. Out here it just goes into the air and disappears, soft. Nobody around you is paying attention to it. It was said quietly, privately, for you only.

You might laugh. You might go still. You might feel something move in your throat. None of those responses are wrong.

What you're experiencing is the return of particularity. The specific gravity of being one person, not a population. Of mattering to the person in front of you as you — not as a case, not as a number, not as a category of risk. Just as yourself.

That moment is small and enormous at the same time.

In many traditions — across cultures and across centuries — a name is not just a sound you answer to. A name carries lineage. It carries meaning that was chosen before you arrived, or meaning that was given to you because of something people recognized in you early. My name, grandfather's name before it was mine. That is not incidental. That is inheritance. That is someone saying: you belong to something that was here before you and will continue after you. You are part of a line.

The system interrupts that line. It does not sever it. But it interrupts it with such force and such consistency that you can start to forget it was ever there.

Coming home requires more than release. It requires reintroduction — sometimes to the people who knew you, sometimes to the ones who didn't, and sometimes most painfully to yourself in the mirror. Because you have changed. You are not the same person who went in. And the person looking back at you in the mirror has your name but has also lived things that the name never anticipated.

That is not a problem to solve. That is a human being, full and complicated and still here.

Reclaiming your name doesn't mean pretending the years didn't happen. It means insisting that the years happened to a person — one with a history that precedes the system and a life that continues after it. Your name is the container for all of it. Not just the worst chapters.

Your criminal record is a legal document. It is not a biography.

I need you to sit with that distinction, because the culture we live in works very hard to collapse it. The culture wants to tell you that the record and the person are the same thing. That the document captures the truth of you. That the charges and the sentence are a sufficient summary of who you are and what you are worth.

That is a lie. And it is a lie that gets repeated so often, in so many forms — in job applications, in housing screenings, in the way people look at you when they find out — that a lot of us start to believe it. We start to perform the penance the culture demands. We perform gratitude for being given chances. We perform transformation. We perform remorse on command, for audiences, in rooms full of people who will decide whether we've earned enough humanity back to be treated like a person.

I'm not saying accountability is not real. It is real. I believe in it. I have sat with the weight of what I did and what it cost and what it meant. That work matters. It is some of the most important work a person can do.

But accountability and humanization are not the same negotiation.

You do not earn your humanity back by complying. You are not granted personhood on the condition of perfect behavior after release. That is not how personhood works. It is not a reward for compliance. It is not something that can be taken and then restored based on your performance review.

You were a person before you were charged. You were a person during your incarceration. You are a person now. That fact is not contingent on your reentry plan going smoothly. It is not contingent on your employer giving you a chance or your parole officer checking the box that says successful. It is not contingent on you never struggling again.

The legal system creates a document. The document is real and it has real consequences and navigating those consequences requires strategy and honesty and often a great deal of patience. I will not pretend otherwise. The record matters in the world we actually live in.

But you do not have to agree with the document's authority over your identity. You can challenge its outcomes in every room you walk into while knowing, in the part of yourself that doesn't negotiate, that it does not define you.

That distinction is not semantic. That distinction is the entire game.

The people I have watched navigate reentry with the most wholeness — not the most compliance, not the most surface-level success, but the most actual human wholeness — are the ones who stopped performing their transformation for an audience. They did their work privately. They claimed their humanity quietly. They stopped waiting for someone in authority to hand it back to them and started operating from the understanding that it was never actually taken.

That is the move. That is what this chapter is pointing toward.

A number was assigned to manage you.

Your name was given to know you.

Those two things are not equivalent. They were never equivalent. And the work of reentry — real reentry, not just release — begins the moment you stop answering to the number. Not on the day you walked out. Not when you finish probation. Not when your record is expunged or your rights are restored. The moment you internally, privately, in the rooms nobody else can see — decide that the number was always just an administrative tool, and your name is what remains.

That moment is available to you right now. In this chapter. Before the next thing happens.

Your name is still yours. It was yours at booking. It was yours in the unit. It was yours every single day the system used a number to refer to you. It was yours when your mother said it and when your child said it and when the person who loves you most said it in the quiet of a space that had nothing to do with any institution.

It is yours now.

This is not a reflection exercise. This is not a worksheet. This is a letter.

You are going to write it to yourself.

Not to the person you are trying to become. Not to the person the system processed. To the child who existed before any of it — before the streets, before the charges, before anyone decided who you were and wrote it down.

Here is how you do it.

Step one: Get paper and a pen. Not a phone. Not a laptop. Paper and a pen. There is something that happens in the hand

when it forms the letters of a name it hasn't written in a long time, and you do not want to lose that.

Step two: At the top of the page, write your full name. Not your last name alone. Not initials. The full name your family uses. The one that carries the most weight when the people who love you say it. Write it clearly, at the top, in the center.

Step three: Begin the letter with exactly these words:

Before everything that happened, you were...

And then keep going.

Write at least one full page. Write about who you were as a child. What you were good at before anyone told you what you weren't. What made you laugh — not a polished memory, but the specific kind: the thing that used to make you laugh until your stomach hurt, the joke that never got old, the moment that would come to mind randomly for no reason. What you dreamed about doing when you grew up. What you were curious about. What you cared about that nobody taught you to care about — the thing that was just yours, unexplained.

Write about your hands and what they used to make or build or reach for. Write about the neighborhood and what you loved about it even if it was hard. Write about the person who made you feel safest when you were small. Write about the smell of a specific room. Write about the version of yourself that existed before the first time something broke.

There are no charges in this letter. No sentence. No release date. No mention of what happened or when or what it cost. This letter lives entirely in the time before.

If you find yourself writing about what went wrong, stop. Cross it out. Come back to the child on the page. The child is the subject. Not the case.

You are not writing this letter to explain yourself. You are writing it to remember yourself.

When you finish, read it out loud. Not to anyone else. Just to yourself, in a room alone. Say your name when you come to it. Say it like it belongs to you.

Because it does.

In Chapter 3, we will look at what happens when the person you've reclaimed has to walk into a world that hasn't been waiting for them — the gap between who you know yourself to be and how the world reflects that back. The work doesn't stop at the name. But it starts there.

END OF TWO-CHAPTER EXCERPT

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

FROM ROLE TO IDENTITY

A Journey of Becoming

The system gave me a number.
God gave me a name.

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Hameem Abdul Qadeer

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