

## Words Unsaid

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# Words Unsaid

by [mightydeafeningmouse](#)

## Summary

Even now, when he's sixteen, JJ can vividly remember his younger self wondering, *When are they gonna teach us how to hold the letters still? How do I read them if they're running away?*

Because, when he was little, he thought everyone saw letters the way he did; jumbled and floaty.

## Notes

Heyo!! This is just a random headcannon born from that scene where the core 4 reads "Redfield" inside the compass for the first time, and JJ can't read the handwriting. I just thought it was a neat prompt, so here we are! Enjoy :)

TW

- child abuse
- mentions of low self-esteem

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# The System

JJ is seven years old when he first comes to the realization that it's weird that he can't read.

Back then, in the second grade, he didn't really understand the significance of being stupid. It was just one of the names his dad called him, so of course, it had to be true, because his dad was right about most things.

Maybe he noticed a few times how the other kids always finished worksheets before him, but JJ just assumed it was because he was stupid.

JJ wasn't helpless, he knew being stupid meant he was slower than the other kids in his class. It meant his classmates understood things he didn't.

But he hadn't realized that his ability to read (or lack thereof) fell into that category.

Even now, when he's sixteen, JJ can vividly remember his younger self wondering, *When are they gonna teach us how to hold the letters still? How do I read them if they're running away?*

Because, when he was little, he thought everyone saw letters the way he did; jumbled and floaty.

It's only when the teacher has them read aloud for the first time that JJ truly realizes how behind he is. He remembers sitting criss-cross-applesauce on the carpet, staring at a girl as she stumbles through a sentence. The bafflement of *How is she doing that?*, is still unmatched by any other experience he's had.

After the girl finished her sentence, the boy next to her began his. Just like the girl did, he looked at the page, and he understood how to interpret the scribbles. JJ was shell-shocked.

When it was his turn to read, he tried his best to copy what his classmates did. He stared at the page and watched the words swirl, begging his eyes to find words like "cat", and "hat", like the other kids did.

Unlike the other kids, JJ was *stupid*, and he couldn't make sense of the scribbles. So, being a clever kid, JJ made up his own sentence about cats and hats, hoping the teacher would believe he was reading.

She didn't.

She had told him stiffly, "I want you to read what's written on the page, JJ."

To which he had responded, "You didn't show me how."

This had made her very upset, because *apparently* he's been learning how to read since kindergarten, and *apparently* he should be more than capable. She also announced that she didn't like being lied to, and it would be great if he could try and not cause problems.

JJ, with a temper as short as him, had shot back, "Well, how the fuck do I read the letters when they keeping running away?"

That sentence did the trick and landed him directly in the principal's office. From there, they called his dad (even after JJ cried and begged them not to), who had to leave work early to take JJ home.

The last memory JJ can recall from that revolutionary day was how that night, his dad beat him so hard, JJ couldn't breathe without pain for a week.

Upon that experience, JJ swore to himself, he would never mention his floating letters to a teacher ever again.

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Despite what teachers say about learning harder things the older you get, third grade ended up being so much easier than second grade.

For starters, JJ met John B, and they easily became best friends within a week.

Not only was John B his favorite person to play with at recess and after school, but he actually helped JJ a lot academically. Either he was too young to notice, or he just didn't care, but John B didn't seem to mind JJ's stupidity. He actually helped.

They created a little system for themselves. JJ figured out a while ago that when doing school work, if the problem was read to him, he could figure it out just fine. It's when no one reads it aloud that JJ has an issue.

Somehow, John B understood this without JJ have to explain it.

So, they developed a system. Anytime they were assigned a worksheet, John B would read it aloud for the both of them, and they would solve it. John B didn't mind it at all, especially since JJ turned out to be surprisingly good with numbers and solving math problems. So, John B read, and JJ helped with math.

It was an arrangement that followed them all the way to high school, until the end of freshman year when they both had to drop out and get jobs to support themselves.

Then there was no need for their system anymore.

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JJ isn't upset that he never learned to read or write. It doesn't matter to him personally, but he knows what people would think of him if he told anyone.

It's really not that bad. Sure, it'd be great if he didn't have to pretend to have the ability of reading and writing, but JJ has long since adapted to it.

Everyone thinks that reading is such a crucial skill to survive, but JJ adopted a few hacks along the way, and reading is apparently not as vital as people like to think.

Like, he calls his friends instead of texts. He looks at the pictures on packaged food instead of the words, so he knows what to buy. He remembers everything, so he doesn't have a need to write things down. He's developed an impressive sense of direction, and has no need for maps or street signs. And, none of the jobs he's ever worked required him to read anything.

Best of all, JJ practicality lives with John B, they're together so often. If he's in a situation where something absolutely needs to be read, 9.9 times out of 10, John B is there to do it for him.

However, aside from the reading aspect of his whole ordeal, writing proves to be a bigger issue, and not something JJ can get around easily.

Maybe JJ is stupid, but that doesn't mean he isn't clever. In the early years of his education, when he was learning how to write, his writing wasn't an issue. Most, if not all, of the letters he copied on the hugely spaced lined paper were either backwards, upside down, or distorted in some way.

It didn't matter back then because he was young enough that most kids were writing their letters backwards anyway. Teachers and parents called it *cute*.

But then he went up a grade level and was suddenly expected to write all his letters the "right way". JJ could never grasp what exactly the "right way" was.

As they progressed through the year, the teacher got more frustrated with his inability to "follow directions". Around half way through the year, his teacher gave up on bothering him about neatness; she let him write the way he wanted to write. She stopped caring how he wrote, as long as JJ could tell her what his writing was supposed to say.

JJ, the clever bastard he was, made a ground-breaking discovery: he just had to *pretend* he could write. If he scribbled on the paper, he could pass it off as cursive or really messy handwriting. And when people asked him what his writing was supposed to say, JJ just told them what he wanted it to say.

It was amazing. Not only did he cheat the system, but he got away with it. Fake it 'til you make it, right?

His god-awful handwriting actually became a running joke between JJ and John B, which John B had absolutely no problem calling him out on.

JJ can remember one specific argument they had during eighth grade, when they were lab partners.

"JJ, that literally isn't even a letter," John B had told him while he looked over JJ's notes.

"It's *cursive*, dipshit. Get cultured," JJ had shot back.

John B had rolled his eyes, "Dude, I don't think you know what cursive is."

"Whatever, I can read it just fine. I'll tell you what it says," JJ settled before rambling about the contents of his notes.

Aside from banter, John B never brought up JJ's horrible handwriting. They didn't talk about his reluctance to read either, at least not in a serious manner.

JJ's thought about telling John B. He doesn't know why the thought of explaining it is so terrifying, because he's pretty sure John B already knows. JJ's aware of how pathetic and stupid the situation is, and he knows he should just talk to his friend about it.

It's so ridiculous. JJ *knows* John B is *nothing* like his dad. He knows John B would never call him the names his dad does.

But, he still can't erase the tiny voice in the back of his head that worries John B will forever think of him differently if he admits to being illiterate.

John B's the only person JJ's ever met who doesn't loathe his presence. The only person who thinks he's worth knowing.

JJ isn't in any rush to change his mind.

# Pope's Insights

## Chapter Summary

Pope notices some things.

## Chapter Notes

Okay, so, I lied. There's no dialogue in this chapter, but we're getting there ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the beginning of freshman year, the pair befriended Pope and Kiara.

Pope had become fast friends with the duo. He was fairly quiet, and super intelligent, and he was assigned to the same English project group as JJ and John B. At first, they hung out in an effort to get a decent grade on the project, but after the assignment was over, they kept hanging out. Eventually, it escalated to friendship, and the rest is history.

Contrary to popular belief, it was Kiara that started hanging with them first. She and John B shared the same ceramic class, where they bonded over being shit at pottery.

As the boys understood it, Kiara had had a falling out with her group of friends, so John B allowed her to take refuge at their lunch table. Slowly, Kiara the Kook became just Kiara, which then became Kie. Before they knew it, Kie was one of them.

Everything just grew from there.

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The mystery of JJ had always been one that stumped Pope. They'd been good friends for about two years now, and Pope feels like he's barely scratched the surface of JJ's layers.

And by god, does that boy have layers.

There are times when Pope feels like he could write a novel for all the shit he knows about JJ, and then there are times when he feels like a complete stranger to him.

It's weird because JJ's an open book, until he's not. He can be obnoxious and annoying, oversharing every nondescript detail about himself and coming off as insanely egotistical.

But, Pope has seen him be soft and sweet. He's seen JJ be subdued and vulnerable, and he's heard JJ speak so incredibly low of himself. From what he can gather, Pope's figured out he

has some serious self-worth issues.

JJ overshares everything, unless it's the important serious stuff. He's happy to tell the world about the people he's fucked and the fights he's participated in, but the second it gets too intimate, too serious, he bails. It's a strange combination of traits, and only John B knows how to deal with each one.

Pope wishes he knew the secret. He wants to know JJ's struggles, wants to learn how he's there for him. Pope wants, *needs*, JJ to learn how to open up to someone other than John B.

Pope doesn't think either of the boys realize how unhealthy it is, the way JJ relies on John B and no one else. Because Pope *knows* what will happen if John B leaves.

It's not a bad thing to need support from someone, but it is a bad thing to become dependent on one singular person. Pope knows John B would rather die than abandon his friends, but with all the drama with social workers and foster care, he might not have a choice soon.

Even though they're months from that happening, if they even do take John B away, Pope still thinks it'd be good for JJ to have someone else in his corner.

Pope just needs to figure out how to break down JJ's walls.

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Pope, after carefully observing, calculating, and analyzing for over a year, is almost completely sure JJ is illiterate. Like, a solid 92% sure.

See, he's noticed a specific dance JJ does every time he encounters anything written. First, his eyes skim over the words, kind of like he's looking for something. Then, he trots over to John B and hands it to him. And every single time, without fail, John B automatically reads aloud whatever's in front of him. Even if he's in the middle of something, he still shifts his attention and reads whatever JJ shoves to him.

The way that John B *instantly* reads aloud whatever he's looking at is always in a casual, nonchalant manner, like it's second nature. Like he doesn't have to think about it. It's so instinctual that Pope would bet money that they've been doing this since elementary school.

And, it's literally anything. Cereal boxes, posters, receipts, clothing, boardgames, etc. All it takes is JJ pointing his finger to the words and John B recites it.

The thing is, JJ does it so subtly. So quietly, as to not draw attention. For a while, it was hard to catch them in the act because anytime JJ noticed Pope was listening, he'd just leave whatever he wanted to read alone.

It was clear that he didn't want to give Pope or Kie the clues to put two and two together. At least, not in the early days of their friendship. Eventually, when they all settled and became more comfortable with each other, JJ stopped caring as much. Even now, if he sees Pope or Kiara looking at him while he's approaching John B, he won't go through with it. But if they pretend they're not listening, JJ doesn't seem to realize.



Another thing that supports Pope's conspiracy is JJ's absolute shit handwriting.

First of all, the guy doesn't even hold a pencil correctly. And Pope knows that there isn't exactly one right way to hold a pencil, because everybody's unique and all, but JJ's pencil grip is so fucking odd. He holds a pencil like a four-year-old holds markers. It actually looks like when he was learning how to write, he just picked up a pencil and no one ever corrected him.

It is possible that the weird-ass grip is responsible for his illegible writing. Pope doubts it though. He's been skeptical of JJ's handwriting since the first time he saw it, when JJ tried to pass it off as cursive.

Which, Pope can admit, it is plausible for JJ's handwriting to be cursive. After all, the slant and font are pretty close to cursive.

But Pope doesn't think it's cursive. He really, *really* doesn't think it's cursive, because why would JJ, of all people, write in cursive? Why would a teacher teach him cursive when they didn't bother to teach him how to hold a pencil?

Pope would even go as far to say JJ can't write as a whole. It's not unbelievable to think that JJ can't read or write, but it's unbelievable that he's gotten this far without having the skills.

It's strange that no one mentions it. He knows Kiara has noticed, he knows she thinks it's weird too. But, they never talk about it. He doesn't know if it's a sensitive topic, or JJ just can't be bothered to learn, but Pope wants to talk about it. He wants to know why, and possibly help JJ learn.

Pope has all his evidence ready to go. He just hopes JJ reacts well.

## Chapter End Notes

I love hearing what you guys think! Leave me kudos & comments, if you're feeling generous :)

# Van Conversations

## Chapter Summary

Pope, John B, and Kiara have a lil talk.

## Chapter Notes

Chapter 3!!! Aka first chapter with dialogue in present time!

It's a little long, but hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Confronting one of your closest friends proves to be a lot harder than Pope originally thought.

JJ can be...unpredictable at times, and Pope doesn't know if this is one of the things that'll end in an explosion, or with JJ denying the living shit out of. It's always possible he might just confess, but that's never been JJ's style.

Pope can't figure out a good way to approach the situation. He's been tossing the thought around his head for awhile now, but with no avail. It's not like he can simply corner JJ and demand him to prove he's not illiterate.

He doesn't know how to tip-toe around it and be cautious while still asking the question.

It's technically none of Pope's business, and he's well aware JJ is under no obligation to tell him shit. All he can hope is for JJ to understand that Pope can help. He just needs JJ to let him.

It's a delicate situation, and Pope can't do it alone. He needs help. He needs the only person who's an expert with JJ's fluctuating moods.

John B.

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It takes Pope another week to build up the courage to ask John B, and then another few days to find the right time to bring it up.

It's surprisingly difficult to catch John B alone, or at least not at a location where they could be overheard. Opportunity finally strikes when John B is driving everyone home after a long

day of fishing in the marsh.

The gang's light conversation comes to a tense halt as the van rolls into JJ's driveway.

The sun is close to setting, granting them just enough light to see the anxious undertones of JJ's hard expression.

John B puts the vehicle in park and turns around to face his friends.

Pope turns to JJ and says gently, "Hey....you don't have to-"

"I do," JJ says quietly. "Just for tonight."

John B can see the discomfort in JJ's body language, his fingers fidgeting nervously and his shoulders wound tight.

"JJ...", Kiara trails off.

JJ looks up at all of them, hating the concerned look that's plastered on each of his friend's faces. A cool breeze blows through the van's open windows, plucking goosebumps from his skin.

"I'll be fine," he says firmly, trying to reassure them. His hand grips the door handle, but before he can yank it open, John B grabs his wrist.

"If I don't hear from you by one tomorrow, I'm coming for your ass," John B says lightly, half joking, half serious.

A small smile tugs at JJ's lips. He opens the door, calling out a quick, "See ya," before shutting the door and walking up the path to his house.

The atmosphere in the van stays heavy and silent as John B peels out of the driveway.

"Why does he go back there?" Kiara whispers, sounding close to tears. It's so nerve wracking for her, for all of them, to know that JJ's spending the night at his dad's.

John B clenches his jaw and shakes his head, which is code for *I know why, but it's not my story to tell*.

"Can't he just stay with you?" Pope asks over Kiara's sniffles.

John B hesitates, looking unsure how to answer.

"He's not eighteen yet. His dad still has....control over him, or whatever. Guardianship."

"So what?" Kiara speaks up, "Fuck guardianship, he's going to kill him!"

"Guys," John B pleads, taking on a softer tone, "You know it's complicated."

Kiara doesn't respond. Instead, she fixes the window with a wistful stare, watching the trees skim by.

Pope climbs into the passenger seat and flicks the radio on. An unplugged version of a random 90s song softly thrums in the background.

It would've been peaceful if the previous conversation wasn't still looming over their heads, fresh in their minds.

Pope knows it's probably not the best time to bring up the whole illiteracy conspiracy, but he's finally caught a rare moment where he's in an enclosed space with only John B and Kie. Who knows when he'll have another opportunity like this, it'd be foolish to not utilize it.

"You know," Pope says calmly, "I've been thinking."

Both Kie and John B make a soft humming noise, acknowledging they heard him.

Pope draws a deep breath.

"A few weeks ago, my dad gave me money to buy groceries for his customers. I had other shit to do, so I bribed JJ into going for me," he pauses, making sure he still has his friends' attention.

"He came back with, like, three things, saying he couldn't find anything else," Pope pauses again, shuffling his hat in his fingers. "So, I went down there, and I found everything, no trouble."

Kiara, who had moved to sitting behind the center console, sighs deeply, "Is there a point to this audiobook-"

"I'm getting there," Pope cuts in. Maybe it's the serious tone of his voice, or maybe Kiara's just too tired to argue, but either way, she falls silent and lets Pope continue.

"Last weekend, JJ came over. It was raining, so we hung in my room, and he was smoking. And you guys know how my parents feel about that, so I told him to go grab a candle from the bathroom, y'know, to mask the smell. I told him *specifically* to get the pine scented one."

John B, who's been uncharacteristically quiet, stares deliberately at the road in front of him, avoiding eye contact. His hands are tense around the steering wheel, and Pope gets the feeling John B knows where this is going.

"He came back with a green one, but it wasn't *pine* scented," Pope continues, "And, just the other day-,"

"That's enough, Pope," John B cuts in softly, still refusing to look over at Pope. Kie glances up at the both of them, a calculating look in her eyes.

Pope stares at him, hard, and quietly commands, "Pull over."

John B gently guides the van to the edge of the dirt road and parks.

Pope reaches over and clicks the radio off, and the silence that follows is nearly deafening. The atmosphere in the van is heavy and dense as both boys try to figure out how to phrase

their thoughts.

"John B," Pope says after a minute.

He looks up in response, eyes finally meeting Pope's.

"JJ can't read, can he," Pope says with such conviction that it sounds more like a statement than a question.

John B looks away, tightening his lips and closing his eyes.

"No, he can't," he confirms quietly.

"Wait, *what*?" Kiara says in disbelief. "And he's how old, again?"

"Hey," John B rumbles, his tone becoming defensive, "Don't talk about him like that. It's not his fault."

Pope perks up. "Could you elaborate...?" He asks gently.

John B hesitates, his fingers absently toying with the faded bandana around his neck. He takes a few moments for himself, organizing his thoughts.

"It's...complicated," he settles on saying.

"Yeah, when is it not with JJ?" Kiara points out, not unkindly.

Pope sits calmly in his seat, trying not to implode with curiosity. He wants to press for answers, but he doesn't want to be invasive of JJ's privacy. He also doesn't want to pressure John B, and he feels like if he opens his mouth, he won't be able to stop the pent-up stream of interrogative questions from bursting out of his mouth.

John B runs a hand through his curls, "Look, I don't know exactly why, okay? We've never really talked about it, but-"

"You mean to tell me you've been best friends with this boy for almost ten years, and you've never asked why he didn't learn to read?" Kiara stresses, eyebrows pulled tight in accusation. "That is the most *on brand thing* for y'all-"

"Well, it's not like he'd be honest with me if I did!" John B squawks.

Kiara looks outraged, "Are you fucking kidding me, JB? You're literally the JJ Whisper, trademarked and everything-"

"Guys!" Pope interrupts their bickering, "I didn't bring this up to fight about it, I brought up to help JJ."

John B freezes at Pope's words. He calms down, instantly redirecting his attention to Pope, "You can help him, like, learn to read?"

"I mean, I *want* to," Pope admits. "I think I could, if I did enough research."

John B stares at him in awe. He's never minded reading things to JJ, it's really no inconvenience, but John B does worry sometimes about situations JJ might find himself in where no one's there to read for him. And since he already knows and trusts Pope, him teaching JJ to read would be such a great opportunity.

John B nods lightly, a small smile tugging his lips, "I think JJ would be okay with that."

Pope answers with a smile of his own, content with John B's opinion.

"Do you really not know why he can't read?" Kiara chimes in, the heat gone from her voice. "I thought he told you everything."

John B bites his lip, tapping steadily on the steering wheel.

"It's one of the-," John B says slowly before cutting himself off and starting again. "He's a little touchy about it, so I just kinda left it alone for a while. JJ would've told me by now if he was comfortable sharing. Pick your battles, y'know?"

Kiara nods her head, understanding the thought process.

"And, it's not that he doesn't want to, or anything," John B adds. "I think it's just really hard for him."

"Hard?" Pope sits up, excited that he's finally getting answers. "Like, missed a lot of school hard or learning disability hard?"

John B visibly tenses.

"Learning disability?" He repeats, eyes wide. "You think he has a learning disability?"

Pope recognizes the mild alarm in his friend's voice, so he responds carefully, "It's not impossible."

John B cards through his hair, looking a little distressed. "But, he's not...*stupid* or anything."

Pope shakes his head, "Having a learning disability doesn't mean he's stupid, JB, it means he has a harder time learning and understanding certain concepts," he explains gently.

John B relaxes a little, his eyebrows furrowing in a thoughtful expression.

"Oh," he whispers flatly.

The sharp noise of crickets chirping flood through the open windows.

"What do you think he has?" Kiara asks, folding her arms on the center console and resting her chin on top.

Pope pulls a leg up to his chest, shifting toward Kiara and John B.

"I'm just saying it's possible he has a learning disorder," Pope states. "It's also possible he missed a lot of school, or his teacher was just super incompetent. Or both. Or all three."

"Well, it probably doesn't help that he can't focus on anything for more than three seconds," Kiara adds.

"Yeah," John B says with the distant 'deep in thought' look in his eyes, "When we were little, our teachers fuckin' hated him 'cause he never followed directions. Like, they'd tell him to do something, and JJ would be like "okay," and then the second they walked away, he'd start playing with his shoe laces or some shit. If someone wasn't actively engaging him, like, just forget about it."

Pope snorts, "Yeah, his ADHD ass was not built for a classroom setting."

"Fuckin' tell me about it," John B smirks, "I've seen him zone out while getting screamed at for zoning out."

Kiara smiles at the mental image of a tiny JJ completely tuning out a screaming teacher.

"Man, our elementary teachers sucked," John B continues, groaning at the memories, "It's kinda fucked up. I swear, JJ wouldn't have been half as horrible in school if a teacher had taken the time help him."

Kiara tilts her head, looking up at John B. "You think so?"

"Oh yeah," John B says easily, with certainty. "All they did was yell at him. Like, think of it from JJ's perspective. Eight years old, can't read or write, everything's probably stressful. All the teacher does is scream about everything you're doing wrong, and the only support system you have is your best friend who can barely read himself."

John B alternates between staring at Pope and Kiara, his voice somber and earnest.

Kiara narrows her eyes, something occurring to her. "Wait, seriously," she picks her head up, "they didn't notice? These assholes didn't realize their student couldn't read? Or write, for that matter?"

She makes eye contact with Pope, who looks at her questioningly.

"We all know JJ's handwriting ain't shit," She says, answering his unspoken inquiry.

"They noticed he wasn't doing his work, they didn't give a shit why," John B murmurs. "Honestly, I don't blame him for not telling anyone. You wouldn't either if you saw the way our teachers yelled at him for not sitting still. He probably thought they'd be angry at him."

Pope hadn't thought of it that way. JJ's always had a shit ton of energy, and even though he hadn't known JJ when they were in elementary school, Pope realizes how tortuous it must have been for him to be forced to sit in a chair for hours on end. It's hard enough for little kids in general to have that type of patience and attention span, even without the natural restlessness JJ has.

With that kind of combination of restlessness, a disregard for rules, and a short attention span, it's understandable that JJ would get scolded more than the average kid, especially if he didn't open up about his struggles. However, teachers are supposed to be trained to see the patterns and notice shit like this. They're not meant to shout everytime a student disobeys, and it makes Pope uneasy to think about a little JJ getting screamed at for something he was so helpless to control. That's the kind of shit that is, without a doubt, responsible for his blatant refusal to seek help from adults.

It makes sense, JJ's deeply rooted trust in John B. For most of his life, John B was his only support system.

"Damn," Pope whispers, because he doesn't know what else to say. The whole situation just sucks.

"You helped him though, JB. Right?" Kiara clarifies, trying not to get too upset over JJ's past.

"Of course I helped him, Kie, I wasn't gonna let him fail and get held back," John B says genuinely. "All I did was read stuff for him and make sure he was focused. JJ knew the answers, and he could figure shit out, guys, it's not like he was helpless," he tries to explain for what feels like the tenth time that night.

"He just needed a little help getting there," Pope finishes. John B nods.

"That's not a bad thing though," Kiara reasons. "It's not shameful to need help."

"JJ thinks it is," John B goes back to fiddling with his bandana. "He hates asking for help. But, I think it's 'cause no one ever offers it."

Pope slams his hands down on his knees, the clapping sound of skin on skin ringing loud throughout the van.

"Well, we are," Pope declares. "I think...guys, I really think I can help."

Both John B and Kiara stare openly at him with a blend of shock and delightment.

"You'd do that for him?" John B says, sounding oddly touched at the sentiment.

"Yep," Pope says, directing a lop-sided grin toward his friends, "and you fools are gonna help me."

## Chapter End Notes

So, I didn't mean to write an ADHD JJ, it kind of just happened. I tried very hard in this chapter to write as in character as I could, but I know there are spots that are fairly out of character. I might come back later and touch up some stuff, but for now, I did my best.



I do have a plan for next chapter, but I really don't know how to go about the gang confronting JJ. If you have suggestions/ideas, I'm open to all!

Thanks for reading :)

# Coming to Terms

## Chapter Summary

JJ learns a new word, and it changes everything.

## Chapter Notes

Chapter 4!! Sorry I took a little longer with this one, but it's here now!

Last chapter, I asked for ideas on how to approach this chapter, and a wonderful person responded and inspired a bit of this chapter. Thank you, Bundibird :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As far as domestic Pogue life goes, Pope's family is probably the closest JJ will ever get to it. Don't get him wrong, JJ has always thought of John B as a brother, as immediate family, but scrubbing dishes with Pope the day after a famous Heyward Feast pulls his definition of "Domestic Pogue Family" to a level he never expected to experience.

Despite the fact that JJ lives in the Chateau eighty percent of the time, JJ doesn't think he's ever washed the dishes there, but he can't think of a single time he's stayed over at Pope's and hasn't done the dishes, or at least helped cook. It's just so rare for someone to make JJ a home cooked meal, that when someone does (unexpectedly, he might add), he feels the need to pay for it in some form.

Hence, scrubbing dishes with Pope for the past ten minutes on a beautiful Saturday afternoon.

Though, it's worth mentioning JJ really doesn't mind helping clean up. It's kind of...refreshing, to be mindlessly chatting with Pope. Most of the time, JJ forgets he's even washing dishes. Like, he's constantly in motion anyway, and scrubbing a plate relaxes him the same way fiddling with his knife does. Washing dishes is just another way to ease his twitchy hands.

"Hey, man," Pope bumps shoulders with JJ, gaining the other boy's attention, "I gotta bounce in a few."

"Like hell you do," JJ frowns, putting a glass on the drying rack. "I'm not finishing these on my own."

"My dad's not gonna mind if you don't get all of them today," Pope offers.

There's still plenty of dirty plates and bowls to wash, and JJ knows Heyward probably *would* mind if the boys don't finish them today.

Or, maybe he'd let it slide. Heyward's been kind of...decent to JJ recently. Not exactly generous, but he tolerates JJ sleeping over sometimes, which is a very new development from his previous law of not allowing JJ in the house.

JJ suspects Pope told his mom something about his home life, and together, they overruled Heyward's wishes. He's almost certain that's what happened, because last week, after he'd gone surfing with the family, Mrs. Heyward had pulled him aside, looking all concerned and upset, and asked if JJ's been getting enough to eat. In all honesty, JJ hadn't noticed he'd lost weight until that conversation.

It's not like it's a big deal. John B already doesn't have much money to purchase food for *himself* to eat, and JJ feels bad taking from him, no matter how many times John B says it isn't an issue. JJ's own money has other necessities to be spent on and saved for, so if he has to go a few days without a meal, so be it. He doesn't consider that to be shameful, or something to pity, but he knew it would upset Mrs. Heyward. So, he delt her his cheekiest grin and assured her he's doing just fine, and that it was nice of her to check in.

Predictably, she didn't believe him for a second. In fact, she made a point to invite him to dinner that night, absolutely refusing to take no for an answer, even when Heyward was less than pleased with the decision.

JJ's never been particularly bothered by Pope's dad's blatant dislike of him, partially because JJ knows he's not a super likable person, but as he spends more time with the family, it's hard to not try and raise Heyward's opinion of him. Even if it's subconsciously, JJ wants Heyward to like him. Or, at the very least, he wants Heyward to not frown when JJ accepts an invitation to stay for dinner.

That's why he makes an effort to set the table, help Mrs. Heyward in the kitchen, or wash dishes whenever he eats with them. Because, it's bad enough that he takes valuable food away from the Heyward family. Valuable food that they could have eaten themselves, but generously choose to waste on JJ. The least he can do is repay them by cleaning up.

JJ groans, "C'mon, bro, at least finish your side."

"Sorry, man," Pope shakes his head, "this Kook family hired me to tutor their daughter, and I'm not about to be fired on the first day."

A sly smile tugs JJ's lips.

"Ooh, I see," JJ smirks, elbow jutting out to playfully nudge Pope. "*Tutor*, huh," he says, making suggestive finger quotations as he says tutor.

Pope rolls his eyes but grins slightly at JJ's antics, "Okay, relax, dude. She's in the third grade."

JJ's mood instantly drops, and he blows a raspberry with his tongue.

"What're you doing tutoring little kids?" JJ prodes.

"They're *Kooks*, bro," Pope emphasizes, placing a clean plate on the rack, "they pay me sixty bucks an hour."

JJ's eyebrows shoot up, followed by a high pitched whistle.

"That's not bad for teaching a brat how to multiple," he says.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Pope's shoulders tense. JJ throws a glance next to him, confused at his friend's sudden apprehension.

Pope hesitates and says with practiced causality, "Actually, she has dyslexia, so things are a bit different."

"What's that?" JJ wrinkles his nose, "Sounds like a foot tumor, or something."

Pope pauses, adding more soap to his sponge.

"It's," Pope bites his lip, "it's a learning disorder. It makes it really hard for her to read."

JJ looks up at Pope curiously, but Pope ignores it, staring at their hands washing the dishes. JJ directs his gaze back to the sink.

"Dyslexia makes her process letters differently," Pope explains, choosing his words carefully. "It kinda jumbles it up, makes letters look backwards or upside down. In some cases, letters actually look like they're floating and moving around."

JJ *freezes*. The glass mug he's holding nearly slips from his hand, and his heart stops dead in it's rhythm.

He flings his head up to see Pope watching him closely.

Is Pope, like...fucking with him? Because what he just described sounds *way* too similar to JJ's situation. No, yeah, he has to be fucking with him, because there's no way on God's green earth there's just suddenly a...*disorder* that is the embodiment of the most screwed up part of JJ.

..Except...

What if there is?

What if there's an *explanation*, what if there's an actual word for what's wrong with him? JJ wants, *needs*, it to be true. He doesn't care if Pope's joking, JJ doesn't have the emotional space to be suspicious right now.

"It's-It's a disorder?" JJ whispers quickly, staring at Pope with wide eyes. He's listening so intently, giving more attention and focus than he's ever given Pope.

"Learning disorder, yeah," Pope answers gently. "It's pretty common."

"...*Common*?" JJ repeats quietly. He draws his eyebrows together, mind moving a mile a minute.

"Yeah, a lot of people deal with dyslexia," Pope continues helpfully. "It doesn't impact intelligence levels, and dyslexic people can still learn to read. Just not the way everyone else learns."

JJ tears his eyes away from Pope, speechless. In the back of his mind, he's aware that if he keeps asking questions and looking distraught, Pope's going to put the pieces together, but he just does not have the capacity to give a shit.

Literally, what the fuck? JJ grew up believing he was so fucking stupid. Like, a whole different brand of stupid, the kind of stupid that makes you so unintelligent, you can't even write your own name. And now, Pope's telling him that not only does this specific brand of stupidity have a name, but it's a *disorder*? And it's *common*?

Where was this information when he was younger, crying in the school bathroom because he was so frustrated that he couldn't figure out how to write the two goddamn letters that make up his name? Where was this information when he nearly failed seventh grade social studies because he couldn't understand the textbook, and the dumbass teacher refused to let him sit next to John B?

His stomach churns uncomfortably, and he feels his heart pick up its tempo.

JJ clears his throat again, but his voice still comes out fragile and disgustingly vulnerable, "And, and you know how to cure it?"

JJ feels like he's under a goddamn microscope with the way Pope keeps eyeing him.

"You can't cure dyslexia, you just learn how to live with it. I know how to help a dyslexic person learn to read, if that's what you mean," Pope replies thoughtfully, eyes not leaving JJ.

JJ doesn't respond. Instead, he stares at the murky bubble water in front of him, his expression heavy with bewilderment and shock.

For real, is Pope joking right now? Because JJ feels like he could actually die if Pope's just fucking with him.

Then again, Pope doesn't *sound* like he's kidding. But why hasn't JJ heard about this before? If it's common, why is this the first time he's ever heard of other people seeing letters the way he does? Why doesn't society ever talk about this learning disorder? Have people been talking about it, and JJ just hasn't been paying attention? More importantly, does John B know about dyslexia?

Pope places a damp hand on JJ's shoulders, forcing JJ out of his thoughts.

"You don't look so good," Pope says with his gentle, cautious voice. "Are you - do you wanna talk?"

JJ shakes his head immediately, forcing his body to relax. He needs time in his head to figure shit out before JJ confides in anyone.

He leans away from Pope, shooting him an easy smile, "Nah, I-I'm good, man."

Pope dries his hands with a rag, and JJ can feel Pope's curious eyes on him.

"Don't you have a date to get to, anyway?" JJ reminds, avoiding eye contact. In an effort to appear unbothered, he resumes his task of scrubbing coffee stains out of Heyward's mug.

Pope falters, sounding oddly disappointed, "I...yeah, I should get going, then," he says, stepping away from the sink.

"See you at John B's tonight, yeah?" JJ calls out flippantly just as Pope opens the back door.

Pope nods, shouting a quick, "See ya," before slamming the screen door behind him.

Just like that, JJ is alone with so, so much to think about.

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It takes a whole week for JJ to sort his thoughts and reach the point of being comfortable enough to approach Pope. "Coming out" isn't exactly the right term. It's more admitting to having dyslexia, even though he's never denied having it. What ever the correct terminology is, JJ's ready to commit.

He *is* ready, he spent the whole week thinking about it. Remarkably, it's the most time JJ's ever spent thinking about a decision. In a way, it's kind of a mile stone, which would be cool if it were under different circumstances.

Mile stone or not, he never wants to think about one thing for that amount of time ever again. It was so *repetitive*, so *indecisive*, so incredibly annoying to have a single topic dominate every thought. And then, just when his brain would reach the conclusion of *Tell Pope, he can help me*, his mind would double back into an endless loop of *You don't have any money to pay him*, and *He's gonna think you're lying to him*.

It took so fucking long to settle on the decision. After thinking through almost every possible outcome, he thinks it's more beneficial if he tells Pope and John B. Worst case scenario, Pope thinks he's even more stupid than he already does. Best case scenario, he teaches JJ how to read and write.

So, really, what is there to loose?

Even if Pope doesn't want to help him, maybe once he knows this new information, he'll think JJ's less stupid. Maybe he'll stop making JJ go purchase groceries if he knows he can't read the goddamn list. Maybe him and John B will finally stop making fun of his fucking handwriting if they know *why* it sucks.

But, no matter how many days he spends thinking about it, JJ can't seem to squash the one unrelenting, nagging thought that maybe, just maybe, his friends will think he's making it up. He spends just about every waking moment with the Pogues, and they definitely know him

well enough to notice he has issues with being honest. Them not believing JJ isn't exactly a far-fetched idea.

And then there's that stupid recurring worry of what if when he tells Pope, Pope laughs at him? What if John B tells him to stop making excuses for being stupid?

It wouldn't be anything JJ hasn't heard before.

But, it feels different, hearing those words in the his father's voice, or a teacher's, than it feels hearing it from a friend. He's well past giving a shit what *adults* think of him, but it's different with John B, Pope, and Kie, because he *trusts* them. Blindly, subconsciously, unapologetically, he trusts his family with everything. For JJ, that's bigger than friendship, bigger than sex, bigger than love. For JJ, trusting someone is rare and delicate and unfairly difficult, that when it happens, it means the absolute world.

Even when he knows trust is nothing but an invitation for heartbreak, JJ still confides so much of himself into these people. He trusts them more than he's ever trusted anything before. Every single day, he trusts the Chateau to be a safe place. He trusts Kie to playfully shove him and touch him from behind without the intention of hurting him. He trusts Pope to selflessly give him food after he hears JJ's stomach rumble, angry from eating only a slice of moldy bread in the past days. He trusts John B to heal his injuries after taking the brunt of his father's unforgiving bouts of rage. He trusts John B to never judge him.

Not only does JJ trust John B enough to allow himself to be vulnerable and unguarded around him, but also to *talk* about his shit.

JJ trusts all three of them to be there for him, to not abandon him.

And yeah, JJ knows trusting someone (especially the way he does his friends) is essentially begging them to crush you. But he also knows he's in too deep, and trying to revoke that trust now will hurt just as much as betrayal. JJ's in so deep, if he were to come out and say, "I think I'm dyslexic," and ask for help, and their response was to make fun of him, it would hurt. Badly.

Probably not *break* him or *destroy* him, like what happened with Kie's "Kook Year", but it would definitely bruise deeply.

He feels weird about wanting to tell them, and he still isn't completely sure the risk is worth it. Like, maybe JJ's just really fucking dramatic, and he doesn't actually have dyslexia. Maybe he just missed too much school when he was younger, and didn't pay enough attention when he was present. Pope seemed kind of serious when he was explaining it to JJ, and he doesn't want Pope to get the idea that JJ's teasing him.

He doesn't want to accidentally make Pope hate him if he turns out to not have dyslexia. JJ knows how ridiculous that sounds, especially because he's like 92% sure he *is* dyslexic, and he knows Pope wouldn't *hate* him over something like this. It's hard not to have those thoughts though, after a week of thinking in circles.

But he's done thinking. The possibility of someone being able to explain and fix whatever's wrong with him outweighs the fear of getting rejected.

The odds aren't too bad. It's time to jump in head first.

## Chapter End Notes

1) For now, this is the last chapter in this fic. I've thought a lot about this, and I really think it's better if I end the story at this point, rather than write a scene where JJ tells everyone about his situation (mainly because of writers block). That being said, I think I'm going to make this fic the first story of a series, and within that series, I plan on mentioning how JJ went about telling the Pogues and their reactions. However, NO PROMISES. I would love to write the series and I have a lot of ideas, but I really don't know when I'll have the motivation. It could be next week, it could be in 2 months, I couldn't tell you.

2) I had a lot of writers block on this chapter, and the reason I don't want to write the scene where JJ tells the Pogues is because I've been brainstorming for a very long time now and still have zero ideas. I know that sounds lame, and I'm sorry, but I really am stuck on it. Maybe in the future, when I get my shit together, I'll add another chapter.

3) And finally, I want to thank everyone for how much support you've given me. Everyone is so, so kind and sweet in the comments. This is literally the best turn out I've ever had on my stories, and it's been so lovely to hear your thoughts. I love you guys, and I'm so happy you treasure this headcanon as much as I do!! You guys are incredible, and I hope you can swing by my other fics in the future. Thank you <3



## End Notes

Let me know if there's any demand for more chapters. I am kinda planning more chapters tho, and they'll be less back story and more dialogue.

Stay safe :)

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