



A SOFT PLACE TO LAND

by Janae Marks



Joy Taylor has always known home to be where she has her own private bedroom, thick walls, and a spacious backyard. However, when her father loses his job, everything changes. In her new apartment building, Joy endures thin walls that do not contain her parents' arguing, a shared bedroom with her little sister, and the crushing news that her piano lessons must be put on hold. Unexpectedly, she finds solace in the "Hideout," a hidden storage room and cozy refuge only the kids in the complex know about, and a mystery letter writer there who seems to understand exactly what she's going through. Janae Marks' compelling and passionate storytelling of Joy finding "a soft place" to land, amid all the changes around her, brings hope, healing, and courage to young readers.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

HOME: When Joy moves to a new neighborhood, she sorely misses her old stomping grounds. Joy laments "how different everything is now" (p. 85). What does she miss about her old home? What is different about her new living situation? How has home been redefined for her now that she is living in an apartment building? What struggles with home does Joy have, of which her parents may possibly be unaware? Lastly, how have Joy's views of what home encompasses shifted from the beginning to the end of the book?

NEIGHBORS AS COMMUNITY: Joy is welcomed by a kind community that exists in her apartment building. How does Joy experience neighborliness in her new home? How has Joy's family benefitted from having a new community of neighbors around them, despite changes in their own family dynamic? When Joy is in a dire situation after losing Ziggy, how do her neighbors pitch in to help? What do you think it means that even people she hasn't "met before, but only seen around the building a few times" (p. 226) are willing to assist?

FRIENDSHIP: Joy experiences feelings of significant loss and sadness when she moves to her new apartment building, but she gains a new group of friends. First, Nora befriends her and introduces her to the other kids her age in the building. Joy expresses, ". . . I miss the feeling of home. I belonged there. I'm not sure I'll ever belong here" (p. 86). How do these friendships as a whole and individually help Joy to know that she "belongs" in her new home? How do these new friendships build confidence and stability in Joy?

THE HIDEOUT: Joy is introduced to "the Hideout" by her new friend Nora. What is the number one rule for the Hideout, a secret place "just for the kids in the building" (p. 51)? What does the Hideout represent for Joy? What symbolism does it carry for Nora, and perhaps their other friends in the building? When the Hideout is accidentally discovered, Joy declares, "It's official. The Hideout is closed" (p. 171). What loss does this symbolize? How is "Home Base" (p. 278), a new reiteration of the Hideout, symbolic of the growth and transition Joy and her friends experience?

INNOVATION: Though Joy finds herself in a time of unwanted transition, she does not let this stop her from dreaming and creating pathways for her ideas. How does Joy demonstrate entrepreneurial savviness? What ideas does she execute with help from the adults around her? Furthermore, how is she a thoughtful risk-taker? How does she use her ideas to ultimately reach her goals and strengthen the friendships around her? How do her ideas and decisions foster and preserve her relationships with friends and neighbors in her building?

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