



SCIENCE

WHAT REPEATS
CONTAINS WHAT
REMAINS

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

ONE	wordsbylena
TWO	Margot Vail
THREE	Dario Selo
FOUR	Colin McAteer
FIVE	Priya Nair
SIX	rpenguin
SEVEN	typewriter_tom
EIGHT	Ruth Ann Keller

Chapter

ONE

written by wordsbylena

Seven Tuesdays. Seven identical bagels at the cart on Fifth. Same sesame count: 847 seeds, clustered asymmetrically, forty-three percent coverage on the top surface. She'd counted twice on Tuesday number five. The pattern held. The rain started at 9:17 AM each time. Fourteen drops hit her left shoulder before she reached the overhang. Always fourteen. She'd stood still on Tuesday six, waiting, counting. The fifteenth drop landed on someone else. Dr. Chen's notebook now contained: - 7 instances of Tuesday, April 12 - 0 instances of any other day - 1 coffee mug (her favorite, the blue one with the chip) - 2 sugars, stirred 8 times clockwise - 3 colleagues who said "Morning, Chen" in the break room - 4 pencils on her desk, arranged identically - 5 minutes of small talk with the security guard - 6 floors in the elevator, same creak between 3 and 4 - 7 items on her lab bench, including the malfunctioning spectrophotometer The spectrophotometer. That was new data. It had broken on the first Tuesday, during the particle analysis. She'd noted the error code: E7-429. Every subsequent Tuesday, it broke at exactly 10:33 AM. Same error. But here was the strange part: she'd fixed it on Tuesday three. Replaced the sensor array entirely. Tuesday four: broken again, original sensor back in place, no trace of her repair. Objects reset. Her notes didn't. She began testing the boundaries. Tuesday five: she took the bagel home uneaten, sealed it in her freezer.

Tuesday six: the bagel was back at the cart. Her freezer held nothing but ice cube trays (sixteen cubes per tray, two trays, thirty-two cubes total). Tuesday six: she broke her coffee mug. Smashed it deliberately in the sink. Eleven pieces, she counted them, arranged them on paper towels. Tuesday seven: the mug sat on her desk, unchipped blue surface reflecting the fluorescent lights (four tubes, one flickering at 2.3-second intervals). She couldn't mark the world. But the world marked her. Her left thumb: one paper cut from the incident report she'd filed Tuesday two. Still there Tuesday seven. Her right calf: one bruise from bumping the desk corner Tuesday four. Darkening to purple. Her mind: seven days of memories, stacking like sediment. The lab was empty. It was always empty at 11:04 AM on Tuesdays. Budget meeting. Everyone attended except Chen, who had sample runs to monitor. Sixty-three samples, arranged in nine rows of seven. She'd been analyzing particulate matter from the new collider. Exotic particles. Decay patterns that didn't match standard models. On the first Tuesday, Sample 47 had done something impossible. Its decay signature had spiked backward, a temporal reversal lasting 0.003 seconds. She'd flagged it as instrument error. On Tuesday seven, she pulled Sample 47 from storage. The label read: COLLECTED APRIL 11. One day before the loop began. She placed it under the electron microscope (magnification: 50,000x, resolution: 0.2 nanometers). The particles were moving wrong. Not Brownian motion. Not quantum fluctuation. They were oscillating in perfect synchronization, 847 particles (she counted), forming and reforming the same pattern every 2.3 seconds. The same interval as the flickering light. She checked Sample 48: normal. Sample 46: normal. Only 47 showed the pattern. Her phone buzzed. The same text she'd received every Tuesday: "Dinner tonight? - Mom." Sent at 11:07 AM. In three minutes. She didn't wait. She opened her archived messages. Found last week's texts. Monday, April 11. From her mother: "Got weird news from the doctor. Call me?" Chen had never called. Tuesday arrived first, and then arrived again, and again. Seven mothers asking about dinner. Zero mothers sharing weird news. She photographed Sample 47's pattern. Counted

the oscillations: 847 particles, 2.3-second intervals, 14 complete cycles per minute. All the numbers from her day. Compressed into one sample. One impossible sample that predated the loop by twenty-four hours. Her phone buzzed. "Dinner tonight? - Mom." Chen wrote in her notebook: "Tuesday 7. Sample 47 is the key. Contains the loop's numerical signature. Question: did the particles cause the loop, or did the loop create the particles? New plan: destroy Sample 47. Test causality. Document everything." She reached for the sample container. The lights went out. All four tubes, simultaneously, not flickering. Just: dark.

Chapter

TWO

written by Margot Vail

The emergency lights clicked on. Red. They had never been red before. Chen checked her watch: 11:09. The power grid had never failed on a Tuesday. She had thirty-two data points now, across seven iterations. None included this. She grabbed Sample 47. The container felt warm. That was wrong. Storage containers were thermally neutral, rated to within 0.2 degrees Celsius of ambient. She held the aluminum cylinder in both palms. Definitely warm. Getting warmer. Not heat transfer. Heat generation. Her instruments were dead. The microscope, dark. The spectrophotometer, silent. But her phone still glowed: 11:09. Still Tuesday. Sample 47 was vibrating. She set it down. Backed up three steps. Watched. Through the translucent polymer lid, she could see faint light. Blue. Coherent. Not luminescence. Not phosphorescence. The particles were emitting structured photons in a wavelength her equipment wasn't designed to measure. She needed containment protocol. She needed her team. She needed to not be alone in a dark lab with an anomaly that predated its own existence. But the loop had ensured she would be. Always alone at 11:04. Always here when Sample 47 decided to wake up. If it was a decision. Chen grabbed her notebook. Wrote by phone light: "Tuesday 7, 11:09. Sample 47 active. Coherent emission. Hypothesis: temporal containment failure. The particles are trying to escape." Escape to where? Tuesday 8? Monday? The moment

before the loop began, when her mother sent a text about weird news that Chen would never read? The vibration intensified. She could hear it now, a high whine at the edge of perception. Fourteen kilohertz, she guessed. The upper threshold of human hearing. Probably exact. Her desk drawer: lead-lined specimen box. She moved fast. Grabbed the box, flipped the lid. Reached for Sample 47. The container cracked. Not shattered. Cracked. A single fracture line, perfectly straight, running from top to bottom. Probability of a random stress fracture forming a geometrically perfect line: functionally zero. Light poured through the crack. Not blue anymore. Shifting. Blue to violet to something beyond violet, a color her visual cortex kept trying to categorize and failing. She should run. Every instinct, every protocol, every safety brief she'd ever attended said: evacuate, seal the lab, trigger containment. But containment couldn't hold something that reset every night at midnight. And evacuation meant leaving it unsupervised for eighteen hours until the loop recycled and put her back here again, starting over, no closer to understanding. She opened the lead box. Lifted Sample 47 by its base, fracture facing up, light spilling onto her hands. Her skin looked strange in that color. Older. Or younger. Or both. Inside the lead box. Lid down. Magnetic seal engaged. The whine stopped. The lights came back on. Four fluorescent tubes. The one over her desk flickered once, stabilized. 11:10 AM. Her phone: no new messages. Still the dinner invitation, still 11:07. Chen opened the lead box. Sample 47 sat inside, container intact, no fracture line. The particles visible through the polymer: inert, scattered, showing normal Brownian motion. She'd broken the pattern. The loop had autocorrected. Wrong hypothesis. Not trying to escape. Trying to communicate. She photographed the intact container. Wrote: "Tuesday 7, 11:11. Containment successful. Sample 47 responsive to shielding. Exhibits repair behavior when isolated from observation. Quantum coupling confirmed. New question: what is it coupled to?" Her mother's text sat unanswered. Weird news from the doctor. Sent Monday. Twenty-four hours before the first Tuesday. Chen pulled up her mother's contact. Pressed call. The phone rang once.

Disconnected. She tried again. Same result. One ring, dead air. Not a network failure. A boundary condition. The loop permitted texts inbound, calls outbound forbidden. Another rule she'd just discovered. She texted instead: "Mom. What was the news?" Sent: 11:13 AM. Three dots appeared. Typing. Then stopped. Then: "Who is this?"

Chapter

THREE

written by Dario Selo

What the loop preserved, apparently, was identity in one direction only. Chen could receive her mother's repeated question about dinner because that question had been asked of her, Dr. Patricia Chen, particle physicist, Tuesday's designated occupant. But her mother didn't remember sending it. Couldn't remember. The message existed in the space between moments, tethered to Chen's timeline but untethered from everyone else's, which meant (and here was the implication that made her set the phone down carefully, screen-side down, as if not seeing it might unmake what she'd just learned) that she might be the only consciousness accumulating duration while everyone else reset like Sample 47's container, restored to factory settings, no memory of repair. Or: she was remembering wrong. Seven Tuesdays felt sequential to her, but what if they weren't? What if each Tuesday was genuinely the first, and her memories were false accretions, neurological artifacts, the friction of a mind passing through the same moment from seven different angles? Except the paper cut. The bruise. The body kept score even when causality didn't. She picked up her phone. Typed: "This is Patricia. Your daughter. You texted me Monday about news from the doctor." Send. Three dots. Stop. Start. Stop. Then: "I don't have a daughter." Chen's hand, she noticed, was shaking. A fine tremor. Frequency: approximately seven hertz. The body's natural resonance

when structural certainty fails. She breathed. Counted. Checked her driver's license, still in her wallet. Mother's name listed as emergency contact: Susan Chen. Relationship: parent. Checked her hiring paperwork, in the locked drawer. Next of kin: Susan Chen, mother. The documents remembered even if the person didn't. Which meant the loop wasn't just temporal. It was relational. It was rewriting ontology, the basic facts of who-is-connected-to-whom, and it had started doing this (she checked her text history, scrolled back, found it) exactly seven texts ago, exactly seven Tuesdays ago, which meant the loop wasn't preserving the past so much as quarantining Chen inside an ever-shrinking circle of coherence. First the day repeated. Then objects reset. Now people were being subtracted from her existence, not by disappearing but by never having been there at all. She looked at Sample 47. Eight hundred forty-seven particles. Her mother's initials: S.C. Nineteenth and third letters. Nineteen times three is fifty-seven. Subtract ten (years since her father died? years since she'd started at the lab? she couldn't remember, couldn't trust the memory) and you got forty-seven. Numerology. Pareidolia. The mind's desperate search for pattern in noise. Except nothing in this loop was noise. The sesame seeds weren't random. The rain wasn't random. Sample 47 was collected April 11, the day her mother sent a text about weird news, and now her mother didn't remember having a daughter. Causal chain or coincidence? In a loop where the flickering light matched the particle oscillation matched the count of seeds on her breakfast, coincidence wasn't a category that applied anymore. She opened the lead box again. Sample 47, inert. She removed the container. Held it to the light. The particles inside looked (she'd need the microscope to confirm, but she trusted her eye) arranged. Not random scatter. Clustered. She counted the clusters: seven. Each cluster containing (she estimated, would verify) approximately one hundred twenty-one particles. Eleven times eleven. The number of days, perhaps, that the loop could sustain before collapsing? Or the number of people who would forget her before she ceased to exist entirely? Her phone buzzed. Not her mother. The number

showed as her own. She was texting herself. The message: "Stop looking at 47. Start looking at 46." Chen set the phone down. Picked it up. Checked the send time: 11:13 AM. The same minute she'd sent the text to her mother. Outgoing and incoming, simultaneous. She hadn't sent this. But her number had. Sample 46. Normal decay patterns. She'd checked it Tuesday 7. Nothing anomalous. But she'd checked it after 47 activated, after the lights failed, after the loop autocorrected. What if 46 was the control and 47 was the corruption? What if she'd been looking at the effect while the cause sat one position over, patient, waiting for her to notice? She pulled Sample 46. Placed it under the microscope, which had power again. Adjusted magnification. Focused. The particles were still. Perfectly still. No Brownian motion. No quantum fluctuation. No oscillation. Just: frozen. Locked in a configuration that looked, even to her untrained pattern-recognition systems, like language. Chen's phone buzzed again. Her number: "You're reading this on Tuesday 8." But it was still Tuesday 7. The clock confirmed it: 11:19 AM. She had four hours and forty-one minutes until midnight reset her again. Unless it didn't.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Colin McAteer

Chen steps away from the microscope. The room tilts slightly, or her inner ear suggests it does. She grips the lab bench. Waits for equilibrium to return. It doesn't. Sample 46 remains frozen under the lens. Sample 47 sits in its lead box, lid open. Between them: her phone, displaying messages from a future Tuesday that hasn't arrived yet, sent by a version of herself she hasn't become. Unless she has. Unless Tuesday 8 already happened and she's living through its memory, convinced it's still Tuesday 7 because linear time is another thing the loop has taken from her. She photographs Sample 46's configuration. The particles form nodes and connections, definitely language-like, possibly language-actual. Sixty-three particles active, arranged in nine clusters of seven. The same dimensions as her sample array. The same numbers that keep surfacing like bodies in a lake. Her reflection appears in the microscope's dark screen when she looks up. She looks tired. Seven Tuesdays tired, which is different from seven days tired because the nights never came, just the same morning restarting, over and over, her body accumulating duration while the world forgot it was supposed to age. Except: her reflection shows a scar she doesn't have. Small, near her left eyebrow. Surgical, not accidental. Recent, maybe three weeks old, the tissue still pink. She touches the spot. Smooth skin. No scar. But the reflection clearly shows it. She moves her head. The scar moves with her,

perfectly synchronized, definitely hers in whatever version of Tuesday the mirror is displaying. Sample 46 is a message. Sample 47 is a transmitter. And her reflection is showing her Tuesday 8, where something happened that required stitches, where her mother doesn't remember having a daughter, where Chen herself is texting warnings backward through a loop that shouldn't permit backward communication but apparently does if you're desperate enough or informed enough or already dead enough that tense stops mattering. She takes her phone. Types to her own number: "What happened to my face?" The response comes immediately: "You tried to leave the building." Chen looks at the lab door. Steel. Reinforced. Locked from the inside, which is wrong. The lock is electronic. It defaults to unlocked during power failures, safety protocol, fire code. But it's locked now. She can see the red indicator light. She tries the handle anyway. Locked. She doesn't remember locking it. She came in at 9:47 AM, logged into her workstation at 9:53, started the sample analysis at 10:15. The door was open. The door is always open. She's alone because of the budget meeting, not because of containment protocol. Her phone: "The loop doesn't want you to leave. Sample 46 is the boundary condition. You mapped it Tuesday 8. Don't map it again." But she's already mapping it. The photograph is time-stamped, filed, backed up to the server. On Tuesday 8, she'll have access to this image. She'll see the pattern. She'll understand something she shouldn't. And then she'll try to leave, and the loop will stop her, and she'll wake up with a scar that exists in reflections but not on skin. Chen opens her notebook. The pages are full. Seven Tuesdays of observations, measurements, hypotheses. Neat handwriting for the first three days. Deteriorating after that. Tuesday 6's notes are barely legible. Tuesday 7 starts with: "If I'm not real anymore, does the data matter?" She doesn't remember writing that. But it's her handwriting. Her pen. Her existential crisis, formatted as a question she knows better than to ask because once you start doubting your own reality, the doubt becomes its own kind of loop, self-referential, no exit. The lights flicker. All four tubes. Synchronized. The pattern matches

Sample 47's oscillation: 2.3-second intervals. Which means 47 is active again, even inside the lead box, even though lead should block whatever field or force or temporal radiation the particles are emitting. Unless the lead box isn't real. Unless it's part of Tuesday's set dressing, a prop that looks like containment but provides none, because the loop needs Sample 47 active, needs it transmitting, needs Chen to keep investigating so that Tuesday 8 happens and the scar appears and something worse than repetition starts occurring. She closes the lead box anyway. The lights stabilize. Confirmation: the box works, which means it's real, which means some things in the loop have function and mass and consequence. Her phone shows 11:34 AM. Sixteen minutes have passed. She's lost time before. Little gaps, moments she can't account for. She assumed it was exhaustion, seven Tuesdays without sleep, microsleeps creeping in. But what if the gaps are edits? What if the loop is clipping out moments where she learns too much or does something that breaks the pattern, leaving her with continuity errors, splice marks in her memory?

Chapter

FIVE

written by Priya Nair

Chen picks up the phone again. Reads the message. "You tried to leave the building." She laughs, which surprises her because nothing about this is funny, but the laugh comes anyway, sharp and a little unhinged. Of course she tried to leave. That's what people do when reality starts eating itself. They exit stage left before the walls close in. She walks to the window. Fifth floor. The window doesn't open, never has, sealed units with argon between the panes for insulation. Outside: the street. Tuesday's street. Same cars at the same angles. Same pedestrian in the blue jacket checking their phone at the crosswalk. Same dog, same leash, same fire hydrant. A diorama. A snow globe. Shake it and everyone returns to position. Except: the pedestrian looks up. Makes eye contact. Holds it. Chen steps back from the window. The pedestrian is still looking. Not at the building. At her. Specifically her, fifth floor, third window from the stairwell. The distance is too great for eye contact to mean anything. Sixty feet, maybe seventy. But she can feel it anyway, the attention, focused like a beam. Her phone: "Don't look outside." Too late. Always too late. Tuesday 8 Chen has already made these mistakes, is sending corrections backward like breadcrumbs, hoping Tuesday 7 Chen will be smarter. But Tuesday 7 Chen is looking outside, and the pedestrian is walking toward the building now, still staring up, and the dog is sitting perfectly still, leash slack, not behaving like a dog at all. She

closes the blinds. Metal slats, they rattle. When she turns around, Sample 46 is glowing. Not emitting light. Absorbing it. The container sits in a pocket of shadow that doesn't match the room's geometry. The fluorescents are directly overhead but the darkness around Sample 46 extends upward, a column of void, eating photons. Chen's hands are steady now. The tremor is gone. She feels calm in a way that probably means shock, clinical detachment, the brain's circuit breaker flipping before the system overloads. She approaches the shadow. Stops at its edge. The boundary is sharp. On this side: lab, instruments, Tuesday. On that side: something else. She holds her pen out. Touches the nib to the shadow. The pen stops existing at the point of contact. Not destroyed. Erased. The portion inside the boundary simply isn't there anymore, and her hand is holding a pen that's now three inches shorter, the end smooth, not cut but never-was. Sample 46 is the boundary condition. That's what Tuesday 8 said. This is how the loop maintains itself. This is the edge of the petri dish, the walls of the maze. Everything inside gets to repeat. Everything outside stops being real. Her phone buzzes. Not her number this time. Her mother's. "I remember now. The doctor said I have a daughter. But I've never had a daughter. He showed me pictures. Birthday parties. Graduation. Your father holding a baby that was supposed to be you. I'm looking at the pictures right now, Patricia. I don't recognize any of it." Chen sits down. The chair creaks. Same creak as always, fourth leg, loose bolt. Some things are reliable. Some things maintain their properties even when mothers forget their children and samples eat light and Tuesdays stack up like cordwood. She texts back: "What else did the doctor say?" Three dots. Stop. Start. "He said I've been in treatment for six weeks. Experimental program. Cognitive reinforcement therapy. They're trying to stabilize my timeline. I didn't know what that meant. I thought he was speaking metaphorically." Six weeks. Forty-two days. Forty-two divided by seven equals six. Six Tuesdays before the seventh. Before Chen's loop started. Before Sample 47 was collected on April 11. Before her mother texted about weird news. She looks at Sample 47 in its lead box. Looks at Sample 46 in its column

of darkness. Looks at her phone, which is somehow receiving texts from a mother whose timeline is being stabilized, whatever that means, whatever experimental program thinks timelines are things that can become unstable. The spectrophotometer turns on by itself. Displays error code E7-429. Chen didn't touch it. It's 11:42 AM, not 10:33. Wrong time for the scheduled malfunction. The screen flickers. New message, replacing the error code: "SAMPLE 46 CONTAINS SUSAN CHEN. COLLECTED APRIL 5. SIX WEEKS AGO. YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING AT YOUR MOTHER." Chen stands up so fast the chair falls over. Doesn't pick it up. Walks to Sample 46. The shadow has grown. It's four feet tall now, diameter expanding. Inside the darkness, she can see movement. Shapes. One of them might be human. Her phone: "I'm in a hospital room. They won't let me leave. They say I'm not stable enough. They say my daughter is working on it."

Chapter

SIX

written by rpenguin

This was a total waste of resources!

Chapter

SEVEN

written by typewriter_tom

Chen grabs the lead box. Slams the lid shut on Sample 47. The spectrophotometer screen goes dark. The shadow around Sample 46 stops expanding. Holds at four feet. The shape inside, human or not, freezes mid-movement. Six weeks ago her mother entered treatment. Six weeks ago someone collected Sample 46. Same day. Same particles. Same woman, except one was walking into a hospital and the other was being stored in a container labeled PARTICULATE MATTER, EXOTIC, and Chen had been measuring her mother's decay signature without knowing it. Hypothesis: the treatment her mother mentioned, the cognitive reinforcement therapy, involves particle extraction. They take pieces of unstable people and try to fix what's wrong. But the pieces don't stop being people just because you put them in tubes. Chen opens the drawer where she keeps the specimen logs. Flips back to April 5. Sample 46, collected 0900 hours, mass 0.047 grams, collection site marked as SITE 7-MERCY. Mercy General. The hospital three blocks west. Where her mother is right now, texting about pictures she doesn't recognize, asking questions about a daughter she can't remember having. The log lists Sample 47's collection site as SITE 7-MERCY also. April 11. Same location. Different date. Chen counts. April 5 to April 11 is six days. Her mother was in treatment for six weeks, which is forty-two days, which means they'd been collecting samples the whole time.

Forty-two days divided by six-day intervals equals seven collection points. Seven samples. She's been analyzing a grid of nine rows by seven samples. Sixty-three total. But only 46 and 47 show anomalies. The rest: normal decay. She pulls the full sample log. Checks every entry labeled SITE 7-MERCY. There are eight. Samples 39 through 47, minus 45. Someone skipped 45. Or 45 never made it to the lab. Or 45 is somewhere else, doing something else, being used for a different phase of whatever procedure turns people into particles and particles into frozen configurations that eat light. She texts her mother: "Sample 45. Where is it?" Response: "They took it this morning. Said it was the last one. Said after this I'd be fixed." This morning. Tuesday morning. April 12. The first day of the loop. The day Sample 45 was extracted and the day her mother stopped remembering she had a daughter and the day Chen started waking up to the same bagel with the same 847 sesame seeds. Causation: Sample 45 was the threshold. The treatment crossed some limit and broke time. Her phone buzzes. Her own number: "You need to see what happens at midnight. Don't let them reset you." The lab door unlocks. Click, loud in the silence. Red indicator turns green. Chen doesn't move. The door is open but she remembers the message: you tried to leave the building. Tried and failed and woke up Tuesday 8 with a scar. Footsteps in the hallway. Two people, different weights, different gaits. Both approaching. She picks up Sample 46. The container is cold now. The shadow has retracted, pulled back inside, waiting. She can still see the shape. Definitely human. Curled in fetal position, knees to chest. The shape has her mother's build. The door opens. Two people in white coats. Not lab coats. Medical. Hospital badges clipped to pockets. The woman in front has a tablet. The man behind her has a case, aluminum, handle-grip on top. The woman smiles. Professional warmth. Zero recognition. "Dr. Chen. We're here for the samples." Chen holds Sample 46 against her chest. "You can't have them." "They're not yours. They're part of the Mercy General study. We have authorization." The tablet comes up, screen showing signatures, official letterhead, Chen's own supervisor's name at the bottom. "When did I sign this?" "April fifth.

When your mother enrolled." Chen didn't sign anything April 5. She was running collider tests. She was eating lunch at her desk. She was living a normal Tuesday that wasn't this Tuesday, wasn't any Tuesday she remembers. But the signature looks right. Looks exactly like hers. The man with the case steps forward. Sets it on the lab bench. Opens it. Foam interior, slots for nine samples. Eight slots are full. The ninth is empty, labeled 46. He reaches for the container in Chen's hands. She steps back. Bumps into the microscope. "What happens at midnight?" The woman checks her tablet. "The cycle completes. Your mother stabilizes. You won't remember any of this." "And if I don't give you Sample 46?" "Then we stay Tuesday until you do.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One had supposed the loop to be a prison. One now understood it to be a negotiation. The woman's expression remained unchanged. The man's hand hovered six inches from Chen's chest, where Sample 46 rested against her sternum. Neither of them blinked at the required intervals. Chen had counted: thirty seconds without blinking for the woman, forty-one for the man. Physiologically improbable. Physiologically wrong. "Who are you?" Chen said. "Hospital staff. Collection team." "Your credentials." The woman turned the tablet. Mercy General ID badges, staff photographs that matched the faces before her. Except the photographs showed backgrounds, equipment, the usual detritus of institutional portraiture. These two stood in her lab with no shadows. The fluorescent tubes cast light but the light terminated at their bodies, didn't pass through to the floor. Chen set Sample 46 on the bench. Opened her phone. Photographed the two figures. The image captured the room, the equipment, the open door. Where the figures stood: empty space. Visible to eye, absent to lens. "You're part of the boundary," Chen said. "We're part of the solution," the woman said. "Your mother can be stabilized. Tuesday can end. You give us Sample 46, the cycle completes, everything returns to normal." "Define normal." "Wednesday, April thirteenth. You wake up. Your mother is discharged from Mercy General with full cognitive function. You continue your work. The collider data is

published. Your career advances as projected." "And I forget this happened." "Everyone forgets. That's how correction works." Chen picked up Sample 46 again. Through the translucent polymer she could see the particles, still frozen, still arranged in their language-pattern. Her mother's consciousness, disassembled into quantum states and stored at four degrees Celsius. How many pieces of a person could you remove before they stopped being that person? How many could you return before they became something else? "Sample forty-five," Chen said. "Where is it?" The man spoke for the first time. His voice had no resonance. Flat, like sound played through damaged speakers. "Integrated. 0600 hours, April twelfth. Your mother received the final injection. The treatment is complete pending Sample 46's return." "You put forty-five back inside her." "Correct." "What happens if I keep forty-six?" "Incomplete restoration. Your mother remains in treatment indefinitely. Tuesday repeats indefinitely. You continue experiencing accumulated duration while everyone else resets. Eventually your neural architecture will collapse under the contradiction. Estimated time: four hundred seventeen iterations." Four hundred seventeen more Tuesdays. Chen would be conscious, aging, remembering. Everyone else would be frozen, repeating, puppets in a diorama. Her mother would stay in the hospital, texting about a daughter she couldn't remember, asking questions no one could answer. But Sample 46 showed frozen particles in deliberate arrangement. Sample 45 was already reintegrated. That meant her mother currently contained forty-five pieces restored plus one piece missing. Incomplete. Which meant the woman texting her, claiming not to remember having a daughter, was telling the truth. That truth wouldn't change when Sample 46 went back. It would crystallize. Become permanent. "You're not restoring her," Chen said. "You're overwriting her." "We're stabilizing her timeline. The procedure is approved." "By whom?" The woman checked her tablet. "By Dr. Patricia Chen, legal proxy, April fifth." Chen grabbed the specimen log. Found April 5. Her signature at the bottom of the authorization form. Above it: a checkbox marked FULL COGNITIVE

REPLACEMENT. Not reinforcement. Replacement. Signed by someone who looked exactly like Chen, who wrote exactly like Chen, who had Chen's authority and Chen's access and Chen's face. Tuesday 8 Chen. The version sending messages backward. The version who already knew how this ended. Chen opened the lead box containing Sample 47. The light spilled out immediately, blue-violet, wrong spectrum. The two figures stepped backward in unison. The woman's tablet clattered to the floor, screen cracking in seven pieces. "Don't," the woman said. Chen held Sample 47 in her right hand, Sample 46 in her left. Brought them together. The particles in 47 were oscillating. The particles in 46 were frozen. Contact: the oscillation transferred. Both samples began vibrating at identical frequency. The room disappeared. Chen stood in a hospital room. White walls. Single bed. Her mother asleep under thin blankets, IV line in her left arm. The bag hanging above contained clear fluid and something else. Particles. Suspended, glowing faintly. Sample 45, reintegrated. And through the IV, Sample 46, still transmitting. Her mother's eyes opened. They were not her mother's eyes.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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