

COURAGE

What We Owe the Spaces Between

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY • WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Lior Tannen
Two	Sammy Hall
Three	inkwell_amy
Four	typewriter_tom
Five	Colin McAteer
Six	rpenguin
Seven	Ruth Ann Keller
Eight	Dan Okafor

Chapter

One

written by Lior Tannen

Marta kept the phone on the kitchen counter now, not in her purse where it belonged. She wanted to see it when it rang, wanted to be ready. Her daughter said she was being paranoid, that it was probably just telemarketers or a wrong number, but Emily hadn't been there in the hospital room when the first call came. Emily hadn't seen the way her father's eyes had opened, just for a second, right as the third ring ended. The doctors called it a coincidence. The brain does strange things, they said. Synapses firing randomly. Nothing more. But Marta had held Tom's hand for thirty-seven years. She knew the difference between random and intentional, even if the intention came from somewhere she couldn't name. She made chamomile tea, the kind Tom always said smelled like cut grass and disappointment. The afternoon light came through the window above the sink, turning everything golden and temporary. She'd noticed that lately, how beautiful things looked when you understood they wouldn't last. The geraniums on the sill. The crack in the blue ceramic mug. The shadow of the elm tree that would have to come down in the spring because its roots were destroying the foundation. The phone rang. One. She set down the mug. Two. She picked up the phone, hands steady. Three. She pressed the green button. "Hello?" Silence, but not empty silence. The kind that holds breathing, or the memory of breathing. She'd learned to listen to it

the way you learn to listen to a sleeping child, alert for any change in rhythm. "I'm here," she said. "Whoever you are, I'm listening." Nothing. But something in the quality of the nothing shifted, like air pressure before a storm. "Tom always said I talked too much. You'd think after all these years I'd have learned when to be quiet, but here we are." She walked to the window, phone pressed to her ear. "Emily wants me to block the number. She thinks someone's harassing me. Maybe they are. Maybe that's exactly what this is." A sound now, faint. Not quite static. Not quite breath. Something between. "But I keep thinking about what you said once, about how the hardest part of being a nurse wasn't the dying, it was the watching. All those families waiting for one more word, one more look. You said we spend so much time trying to hold on that we forget to pay attention to what's actually there." The elm tree's shadow stretched across the lawn, reaching for the garden where she'd planted cosmos this year instead of roses. Tom had always wanted roses, but cosmos were easier. They seeded themselves, came back without trying. "So I'm paying attention," she said. "I don't know what to you, exactly. But I'm here." The sound crystallized into something almost like a voice, almost like a word. The shape of it familiar, though she couldn't make out meaning. Then it was gone, and the line went dead. Marta set the phone back on the counter. She noticed her hands were shaking now, after. Not during, only after. The tea had gone cold. She poured it down the sink and started over, filling the kettle, setting it on the burner. Through the window, she could see Mrs. Chen from next door deadheading her dahlias, patient and methodical, saving the best blooms for one more day. The phone sat silent on the counter, waiting. In three hours, maybe four, it would ring again. Three times. She would answer. And whatever was on the other end, whatever shape courage took when you were seventy-two and running out of certainties, she would keep listening. Because Tom had been right. The hardest part wasn't the dying. It was figuring out what you owed the spaces in between.

Chapter

Two

written by Sammy Hall

Emily showed up on Thursday with groceries and questions, which is how it always went with her. Questions disguised as concern, concern disguised as casserole ingredients. She unpacked organic chicken breasts and kale, things Marta would never buy for herself, things that tasted like trying too hard. "You're still getting the calls," Emily said. Not a question, even though she phrased it carefully. She had that look, the one she'd inherited from Tom, the one that said she'd already made up her mind but was giving you room to confess. "Sometimes," Marta said, which was true in the way most truths are true when you only tell the edges of them. "Mom." Emily set down a bag of quinoa with more force than quinoa deserved. "This isn't healthy. You're waiting for them. I can tell." What Marta wanted to say was that waiting was different from hoping, and hoping was different from knowing, and somewhere between all three was where she lived now. What she said instead was, "The chicken will go bad if we don't cook it tonight." They made dinner in the kind of silence that fills up houses after someone dies. Not the person, not yet, but the version of life where that person was going to get better. Emily chopped vegetables with surgical precision. She'd gone to law school instead of medical school, which Tom had never quite forgiven, though he'd never said it out loud. Marta had always wondered if that's why Emily worked so hard at everything. Trying to

make up for a disappointment no one had actually voiced. The phone rang during dinner. Emily's fork stopped halfway to her mouth. "Don't," she said. But Marta was already standing, already crossing to the counter. One. Two. Three. "Hello?" The sound on the other end had changed. Less like almost-breathing, more like wind through a structure. A tunnel, maybe, or a throat. Emily was at her elbow now, trying to listen, her face doing that thing where she was both furious and terrified, which is how love looks sometimes when you can't control what you're afraid of losing. "There's no one there," Emily whispered. "Mom. There's nothing." Except there was. Marta could feel it the way you feel weather coming, the way you know without knowing that the season is about to turn. She closed her eyes and listened harder. The sound shifted. Resolved. Became almost a word, became almost her name, became almost Tom's voice saying "Mar," which is what he'd called her when they were young and hadn't yet learned that brevity was just another word for running out of time. Then Emily took the phone from her hand and ended the call. "You can't keep doing this," Emily said, and she was crying now, which Marta hadn't expected. "You're disappearing into this. You're haunting yourself." Marta sat back down at the table. The chicken had gone cold. The kale looked sad and virtuous. "Your father used to say that courage wasn't about being fearless. It was about being afraid and doing the thing anyway." "This isn't courage. This is grief making you crazy." "Maybe those are the same thing sometimes." Emily left an hour later with the kind of hug that apologizes for everything it can't fix. Marta washed the dishes and put away the quinoa and stood at the window watching darkness settle over the lawn like forgiveness. The phone stayed quiet for the rest of the night, which felt like punishment, though she couldn't say for what.

Chapter

Three

written by inkwell_amy

Marta woke at 2 a.m. to the sound of breaking glass. Not the phone. Glass. She sat up in the dark, heart kicking against her ribs, and listened. The house settled around her, floorboards contracting in the cold. Nothing else. She reached for the lamp, but her hand stopped halfway. If someone was downstairs, light would tell them she was awake. She got out of bed. Her feet found the floor, then the doorway. The hallway stretched ahead, darker than it should be. The nightlight by the bathroom was out. She moved toward the stairs, one hand trailing the wall for balance. At the landing she stopped. The kitchen window. She could see it from here, or what was left of it. Moonlight came through the jagged hole where the pane used to be, silvering the edges of broken glass on the linoleum. The rest of the window was still intact. Just one pane. Precise. She went down the stairs. Slow. Each step deliberate. At the bottom she stopped again and looked at the mess. Glass everywhere. And in the center of it, on the counter next to the phone, a rock the size of a fist. Not a rock. She stepped closer. A chunk of concrete, rough edges, the kind that breaks off old foundations when the roots get underneath and start lifting. The elm tree. She looked out through the broken window at the backyard. The tree stood black against the sky, branches motionless. No wind. The air was completely still. She picked up the phone. No missed calls. The screen was blank except for the time,

glowing green. She turned it over in her hands, then set it down and looked at the concrete again. There was something written on it. Scratched into the surface with something sharp, the letters crude but readable. STOP LISTENING. Her breath caught. She touched the letters, tracing them. The concrete was warm. A sound behind her. She spun, but the living room was empty. Just furniture shapes in the dark. She crossed to the doorway and looked. Nothing. But the air felt different now. Compressed. Like before a phone call. She went back to the kitchen. Put on shoes. Took the broom from the closet and swept the glass into a pile, then into the dustpan, then into the trash. Her hands were steady. The concrete chunk she left on the counter. When the floor was clear she unlocked the back door and stepped outside. The grass was wet with dew, cold through her shoes. She walked across the lawn to the elm tree and put her hand on the bark. Solid. Real. The roots had buckled the ground around the base, pushing up small hillocks of earth. In the spring they would take it down. Chain saws and a crane. Men in harnesses. The whole structure dismantled, piece by piece, until nothing was left but a stump and the memory of shade. She walked around the trunk. On the far side, where the roots were worst, the ground had opened up. Not just buckled. Opened. A gap between two root masses, black earth underneath, going down farther than the moonlight reached. She knelt. The smell coming up from the gap was wrong. Not soil. Something older. Something that had been closed and was now breathing. A sound from the house. The phone ringing. She could hear it through the broken window, thin and insistent in the night air. One. She stood up. Two. She started walking back toward the house. Three. She was at the door when the ringing stopped. She went inside. Picked up the phone. The screen showed a missed call. Same number. Always the same number. But now there was something else. A voicemail. In three years of calls, there had never been a voicemail. She pressed play. Static. Then wind. Then something underneath the wind that might have been her name, might have been Tom's voice, might have been nothing at all. And then, clear as breathing, clear as the space between heartbeats, a

single word. "Come." The line went dead. Marta set the phone down. Looked at the broken window. Looked at the concrete chunk with its warning. Looked at her hands, which were shaking now, finally shaking. She put on a coat. Found the flashlight in the drawer by the stove. Walked back outside, across the wet grass, to the elm tree and the gap in the earth where the roots had pulled something open. The flashlight beam showed dirt. Stones. And deeper down, something pale. She got on her knees in the cold mud and reached into the dark.

Chapter

Four

written by typewriter_tom

The pale thing was fabric. She pulled and it came up in her hand, rotted and strange. A shirt. No, a hospital gown. The kind Tom had worn. She dropped it. Picked up the flashlight. Aimed it down into the gap. The beam caught something else. Metal. She reached again, fingers scraping rock and root until they found it. Cold. Cylindrical. She pulled it free and held it up to the moonlight. A pill bottle. Empty. The label was still legible, barely. Tom's name. The prescription he'd been on before the coma, the one that was supposed to help with the tremors but instead made him confused, made him forget where he was. She put the bottle in her pocket. Kept digging. More fabric. Then something hard. Rectangular. She worked it loose from the earth and brought it up. A phone. Not hers. Older. Caked in dirt but intact. She wiped the screen with her sleeve. Pressed the power button. Nothing. Dead. Of course it was dead. But then the screen flickered. Impossibly, it flickered. A dim glow, like it was pulling power from somewhere that had nothing to do with batteries. One notification. A text message. Sent three years ago. The day Tom went into the hospital. She opened it. The message was from Tom's number. To this phone. The one in her hand. It said: I buried it where the roots go deepest. Don't let her find it. Her. Not Marta. Someone else. The phone in her pocket rang. Her phone. The real one. She pulled it out. Same number calling. Always the same number. But

now she understood it wasn't Tom. Had never been Tom. She answered. "You found it." A woman's voice. Not old, not young. Familiar in a way that made Marta's skin go cold. "Who is this?" "You know who I am. You've always known. You just didn't want to see." Marta stood up. The flashlight beam swung wild across the tree, the yard, the house. "I don't know you." "Room 304. St. Catherine's Hospital. I was there when Tom came in. I was there every time you visited. I wore the blue scrubs. You never looked at me. People never look at nurses unless they need something." Marta remembered. Vaguely. A woman. Younger than her. Always at the edges of things. "What do you want?" "I want you to stop digging. I want you to put the phone back. I want you to go inside and forget what you found." "Why?" Silence. Then: "Because Tom didn't fall. And the medication didn't make him sick. And if you keep pulling at this thread, you'll unravel everything." The line went dead. Marta looked at the old phone in her hand. The screen was still glowing. She opened the messages. Scrolled up. Dozens of texts between Tom and this number. All from the weeks before his collapse. I can't keep doing this. She'll destroy you if she finds out. I don't care anymore. I'm telling her. Please. Think about what you're risking. I'm done being afraid. The last message was from the woman: Then you leave me no choice. Marta's chest went tight. She scrolled further. Found photos. Tom and the woman. Close. Too close. A restaurant. A hotel room. His hand on her face. She sat down in the mud. The flashlight rolled away, its beam cutting through the dark at a useless angle. Tom had been having an affair. And then he'd ended up in a coma. The pieces arranged themselves. The medication that wasn't supposed to interact with anything but did. The nurse who had access. The sudden collapse. Her phone rang again. She didn't answer. It rang and rang. Stopped. Started again. She picked it up. "What did you give him?" "Marta. Please." "What did you give him?" A long pause. Then: "Enough to make him sleep. Not enough to kill him. I didn't want him dead. I just wanted him quiet." "You put him in a coma." "I made a mistake. The dosage was wrong. I didn't mean for it to go that far." Her voice cracked. "I loved him. I still love him. That's why

I've been calling. I needed you to know he's still in there. I needed you to let him go." Marta stood up. Started walking toward the house. "Where are you going?" "To call the police." "They won't believe you. There's no proof. The medication's long gone from his system. And that phone? It doesn't prove anything except that your husband was a cheater." Marta stopped at the back door. "Then why are you so afraid?" No answer. "You wanted me to stop listening," Marta said. "You threw the concrete. You tried to scare me.

Chapter

Five

written by Colin McAteer

Marta walks back through the broken window's light, the old phone still clutched in her hand. The woman is breathing on the other end of the line, waiting, and Marta realizes she's been waiting this whole time. Not for Tom to wake up. For this. She sits at the kitchen table. Sets both phones in front of her, side by side. The old one's screen pulses with that impossible dim light. Her own phone glows steady and ordinary. "You're still there," Marta says. "I'm always here." The woman's voice has changed. Smaller now. "I've been here for three years." "Tell me your name." A pause. "Claire." "Claire." Marta tastes the word. It sounds young. "How old are you?" "Thirty-four." The same age Emily had been when Tom went into the hospital. Marta closes her eyes. Opens them. The kitchen looks different now, like she's seeing it from underwater. The broken window. The concrete chunk with its warning. The pills bottle in her pocket, pressing against her hip. "He was going to leave me," Marta says. Not a question. Claire doesn't answer right away. When she does, her voice is thick. "He said he was. But I don't think he would have. Men like Tom don't leave." "Men like Tom." "Good men. Guilty men." Marta picks up the old phone. Scrolls through the messages again. There's one she missed before, buried in the middle. From Tom to Claire: I told Marta I was working late. I'm always working late now. I don't recognize myself anymore. "He felt terrible," Claire

says, like she can see what Marta is reading. "Every time. He'd leave me and go home to you and I could feel him disappearing. Choosing you. Even when he was with me, he was choosing you." "But you called anyway. After." "I had to know if he could hear me." Marta sets the phone down. Stands. She walks to the sink and pours a glass of water she doesn't drink. Outside, the elm tree stands black against the lightening sky. Dawn is coming. She's been out here all night. "The calls were never Tom," Marta says. "They were you. Checking if he responded." "At first. But then they became something else." Claire's breathing changes. "I started calling for me. Because I couldn't stop. Because three years ago I killed the person I loved most in the world and no one knew. No one was punishing me. I was just walking around, working, living, and he was gone and it was my fault." "He's not gone. He's in a coma." "He's gone, Marta. You know that. You've known it for months." The water glass is cold in Marta's hand. She sets it down before she can drop it. Through the broken window, she can hear birds starting. The first ones, tentative, testing the dark. "The doctors say he could wake up," Marta says. "The doctors are kind." "His eyes opened. When you called that first time." "His eyes opened because that's what bodies do sometimes. Reflexes. Not consciousness. You know the difference." And Marta does know. Has known since that moment in the hospital room when she saw Tom's eyes move and understood there was nothing behind them looking back. Just movement. Just meat and electricity and the stubborn machinery of staying alive. She sits back down. Both phones in front of her. Claire breathing on one. The other one glowing with Tom's last words. I'm done being afraid. "What are you afraid of?" Marta asks. Silence. "Claire. What are you afraid of?" "That you'll forgive me," Claire says. "That's what terrifies me most. Because if you forgive me, then I have to find a way to live with what I did. And I don't know how to do that." Marta looks at the concrete chunk. STOP LISTENING. She thinks about courage, about what Tom said it meant. Being afraid and doing the thing anyway. "I'm not going to call the police," Marta says. Claire exhales. "Okay." "I'm going to the

hospital. And you're going to meet me there." "What?" "Room 304. One hour." Marta picks up her phone. "You wanted me to listen. Now you're going to listen to me." She ends the call before Claire can answer. The old phone's screen flickers once, twice, then goes dark. This time it stays dark. Marta stands. Gets her purse. Her keys. She leaves the broken window, leaves the concrete chunk, leaves the glass she didn't quite finish sweeping. On her way out, she stops at the elm tree. Puts her hand on the bark one more time. In the gap where the roots opened the earth, she can see the first hint of morning touching the exposed soil. She drives to St.

Chapter

Six

written by rpenguin

She drove. She crashed. She flew.

Chapter

Seven

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One ought not to fly through a windscreen at one's age, Marta thought, and then the thought stopped, because her head struck the dashboard and everything became very simple. Steering wheel. Tree. The elm tree, in fact, which she had left behind in her yard but which appeared to have followed her. No. Not her tree. A different elm, on the curve before St. Catherine's, where the road bent sharply and she had not bent with it. Her foot had found the accelerator rather than the brake. An error of seventy-two years. An error of not sleeping. An error of three years of waiting and one night of digging and the sudden understanding that one's husband had been two people, and one had loved him while the other had been a stranger to her entirely. The windscreen had not broken. She was not on the road. She was still in the car, folded against the wheel, the airbag deflated beside her like something that had tried and failed to catch her. She tested her fingers. They moved. Her toes. Moved also. Her ribs made a report that suggested they were not entirely pleased with recent events, but they were functioning. She unbuckled herself with hands that appeared to belong to someone else, so steady were they, so calm. The door opened when she pulled the handle. This seemed remarkable. She stepped out onto grass wet with dew, the same cold wetness she had knelt in at the tree roots, and regarded the front of her car. The hood had crumpled. The bumper had kissed the elm with

rather more enthusiasm than was appropriate. She looked at her watch. Tom's watch, actually, which she had been wearing since the hospital. The crystal had cracked. The hands had stopped at 5:47. Dawn proper now, the sky going grey and pink at the edges. A car passed. Slowed. Did not stop. The driver looked at her, looked at the tree, looked forward again and continued on. She supposed she must not appear to be dying. People did not stop for those who appeared to be managing their disasters independently. She reached into the car for her purse. Both phones were inside. Her own still functioning. The old one still dark. She put them away and began walking. St. Catherine's stood three-quarters of a mile distant. She had driven past the turn. A miscalculation. She walked along the shoulder, gravel crunching beneath her shoes, the ones she had worn into the garden. They were still muddy. The medication bottle was still in her pocket. She could feel it with each step, a small weight shifting against her hip. Evidence. Or not evidence. Claire had been correct in that regard. What did it prove, truly? That Tom had been prescribed pills. That someone had buried them. A truck approached from behind. She did not turn. It passed. She kept walking. Her ribs made themselves known with greater insistence. She placed one hand over them and applied pressure. This seemed to help, or at least to redistribute the complaint. She reached the hospital's entrance at 6:15 by the clock above the reception desk. The guard looked at her. At her shoes. At the mud. "Do you require assistance, ma'am?" "I have an appointment in Room 304," Marta said. "Visiting hours commence at eight." "Nevertheless." They regarded one another. He was young. Twenty-five, perhaps. He had not yet learned that rules were things one could walk past if one simply continued walking and did not invite negotiation. She walked. He did not stop her. The elevator. The third floor. The familiar corridor. She had walked this path so many times that her feet knew the way without consulting her. How many steps from elevator to room? Two hundred and thirty-seven. She had counted once, in the first month, when counting had seemed important. The door to 304 stood open. She entered. Tom lay as he always lay. The machines

performed their usual orchestrations. His chest rose and fell with the dependability of clockwork. A woman sat in the chair beside the bed. Not old. Not young. Brown hair pulled back. Blue scrubs. She stood when Marta entered. "You came," Claire said. "One generally keeps one's appointments," Marta replied. She crossed to the opposite side of the bed. Tom between them. She placed her hand on his. Claire watched. "Now," Marta said. "You shall tell me everything.

Chapter

Eight

written by Dan Okafor

Claire remained standing. She did not sit back down, though Marta had given her permission to do so by taking up her own position. They faced each other across Tom's breathing machinery. "His tremors started in March," Claire said. "Three years ago. He came in for tests. I was assigned to his floor." "Skip ahead to where you began sleeping with him." Claire flinched. Good. Marta was not interested in the courtship portion of this narrative. "July. He asked me to coffee. We went to the place across the street. The one with the blue awning." Claire looked down at Tom. "He told me about the garden. About you planting cosmos instead of roses." "He wanted roses. I am not fond of thorns." "He said that too." Claire's hands twisted together. "He talked about you constantly. I should have stopped seeing him. But I didn't." Marta's ribs sent up another complaint. She ignored them. "The medication." "He was on tremor medication already. Standard dosage. But he started having episodes. Confusion. Memory gaps. The doctor adjusted the dose. Then adjusted it again." "And you adjusted it further." "Not at first." Claire walked to the window. Dawn had arrived properly now, spilling institutional pink light across the linoleum. "At first I just listened. He'd come to my apartment and talk about leaving you. How he couldn't. How he owed you his life. How you'd put him through nursing school and raised Emily mostly alone while he worked nights. He

catalogued his debts to you like rosary beads." "He did work nights," Marta said. "That portion was true." "I know. I was there for some of them." Claire turned. "In January he told me he was ending it. Us. He said he'd been foolish. Said he'd nearly destroyed something irreplaceable for something temporary." "And you poisoned him." "I gave him three times his prescribed dose. Mixed into his coffee. The morning before his last shift." Claire's voice had gone flat. "I thought he'd sleep for a day. Maybe two. That he'd miss work. That you'd be worried. That he'd realize how fragile everything was. How easily things could fall apart." "Instead he came to work. Collapsed in the supply room. Struck his head." "The head injury was the problem. The medication made him drowsy, confused. But the head injury caused the bleed. The coma." Claire sat down finally. Collapsed, really, into the chair. "I've reviewed it ten thousand times. If he'd just stayed home. If the dose had been smaller. If he hadn't turned at exactly that moment and hit the cart on his way down." Marta looked at Tom's face. Peaceful. He had always looked peaceful in sleep, even before the coma. Even when things between them had been difficult, which they had been often, though Emily didn't know that. Marriage was long. There were years when one loved the person and years when one simply continued. "You called because you wanted him to wake up and forgive you," Marta said. "I called because I was afraid he already had. Woken up. That he was in there, aware, and couldn't move or speak. That every time I called he could hear me and was screaming inside where no one could hear back." "That would be a considerable hell." "Yes." The machines beeped. Performed their functions. Marta reached into her pocket and withdrew the medication bottle. She set it on the tray table beside Tom's bed. The evidence that proved nothing. "The doctors have recommended we remove life support," Marta said. "They suggested it six months ago. Emily agrees with them." Claire went very still. "I have refused. I told them I was waiting for a sign." Marta picked up Tom's hand. The familiar weight of it. The knuckles she knew better than her own. "I have been waiting for him to tell me when." "Marta." "But he cannot tell me.

You have ensured that." She set his hand down gently. "So you will tell me instead." "What?" "You are a nurse. You understand these matters. Look at him. Look at the scans, the charts. Tell me what you see." Claire stood slowly. Crossed to the monitor. Read the displays with professional efficiency. Her hands moved across the screen, pulling up records. Minutes passed. Finally she turned. "He's gone," Claire said. "He's been gone for two years at least." "Yes," Marta said. "I know.

Finished on 26 April 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

[https://relaywriters.com/read/12?t=5vQ07cHD4vHVycI1_NbobymOGzx
-QZtW](https://relaywriters.com/read/12?t=5vQ07cHD4vHVycI1_NbobymOGzx-QZtW)