



COURAGE

The Door That Wasn't There Yesterday

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
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Chapter

One

written by Lior Tannen

The kitchen smelled like burnt toast when Vera picked up on the fourth ring. Breaking pattern made her hand shake, but the silence on the other end was the same. She could hear breathing. Not heavy, just present. Like someone waiting for her to remember something important. "I know you're there," she said, softer than she meant to. The line clicked dead. Her daughter Meredith breezed in at noon with groceries Vera hadn't asked for, the kind of help that felt like an inspection. "Mom, you're still in your robe." She unpacked almond milk, gluten-free bread, things Vera would never buy. "Have you been eating?" "I eat fine." "The hospital said you need to keep your strength up." Meredith arranged oranges in the fruit bowl with the labels facing out, like she was staging a photograph. "Are you taking the pills they sent home?" Vera thought about the orange bottles lined up by the sink, how she'd been letting them pile up because swallowing them felt like admitting something. "Most days." "Most days isn't every day." Meredith's voice had that tight quality, love wrapped in exasperation. She'd sounded like that since high school, since the first time Vera had forgotten to pick her up from play practice. Vera had been thirty-eight then, too young for forgetting. But it had started even then, little gaps in the day, moments that slipped through her fingers like water. The phone rang. Once. Twice. Meredith reached for it but Vera got there first, surprising them both with her

speed. "Hello?" The breathing again. And something else, underneath. A sound like wind through a screen door. Or crying, very far away. "Who is this?" Meredith asked, trying to take the receiver. Vera held on. She closed her eyes and the hospital came back to her: the tile floor, the fluorescent lights, the doctor with kind eyes explaining about the tests. But before that, there had been something else. A room she didn't remember entering. A window that looked out on a parking lot she'd never seen before. And a woman in the next bed who'd said, "They always call after," though Vera hadn't understood what that meant. "Mom?" Meredith's hand on her shoulder, pulling her back. The line went dead again. "You're scaring me," Meredith said. "I'm scaring myself," Vera admitted, and it was the truest thing she'd said in weeks. That night, after Meredith left with promises to return tomorrow and threats to start looking at assisted living brochures, Vera sat by the phone. The clock above the stove ticked past midnight. She'd made tea she didn't drink. The pills sat in front of her, a small mountain of forgetting and remembering, though the doctors hadn't explained which was which. At 12:47, the phone rang. Three times, like always. But when she answered, there was a voice. "Vera." Not a question. Just her name, spoken by someone who knew her, really knew her, from some place she couldn't quite reach. The voice was old and young at once, worn smooth like river stones. "Who are you?" "You told me to call. You said if you forgot, I should remind you." Vera's free hand found the edge of the table, gripped it. "Remind me of what?" "What you did. What you saw. Why they want you to take the pills." The kitchen tilted. Vera sat down hard in the chair. "I don't understand." "You will," the voice said. "When you stop taking them. When you let yourself remember the window, and the parking lot, and the door that wasn't there before." "This isn't real." "Neither was the hospital," the voice said. "Not the way you think." The line went quiet but didn't disconnect. Vera could still hear breathing. Her own, she realized. And someone else's, perfectly synchronized.

Chapter

Two

written by inkwell_amy

Vera slammed the receiver down and the pills scattered. Her hand had jerked without permission, knuckles cracking against laminate, orange cylinders rolling across the floor like escaped insects. One spun into the baseboard and kept rattling there, trapped. She knelt. Her knees protested but she went down anyway, palms flat on cold linoleum, eye level with dust and lost things. The pill had wedged itself in the gap where the baseboard had pulled away from the wall. She could see into the dark space behind it, a sliver of nothing that went deeper than it should. Something moved in there. Vera lurched backward, hip striking the table leg. The thing in the gap was white. Paper white. Finger white. It curled once and withdrew. She got up. Walked to the sink. Turned on the water and let it run cold over her wrists the way her mother had taught her during panic attacks, back when panic attacks were just nerves and nerves were something you conquered. The window above the sink reflected her face and the kitchen behind her. The clock read 12:53. In the reflection, the baseboard gap was wider. She didn't turn around. Kept her eyes on the mirror image, on the kitchen that looked like hers but wasn't quite. The fruit bowl sat on the counter but the oranges were gone. The pills on the floor had stopped rolling but there were more of them now, dozens, scattered like seeds someone had broadcast across soil. The gap in the baseboard was definitely wider.

Wide enough to fit a hand through. An arm. Vera turned. The kitchen snapped back into normal. Three pills on the floor. Baseboard intact except for that one small split. Clock at 12:53, same as before. She picked up the pills. Put them in her robe pocket. Left the one behind the baseboard where it was. Upstairs, she changed into jeans and a sweater, thick socks, her walking shoes. Dressed like someone who might need to run. She hadn't thought about running in years but her body remembered the weight of it, the crouch before the sprint. Her hands remembered too. They opened the closet and found the box on the top shelf without hesitation, pulled it down through muscle memory her conscious mind had misplaced. Inside: a badge that expired in 2003. A gun she'd turned in when she retired. Except she was holding it now, so maybe she hadn't turned it in. Maybe that was another thing the pills had papered over. The phone rang. Vera checked the clip. Full. She went downstairs with the gun in her hand and picked up on the second ring, breaking pattern again. "I'm still here," she said. "The door," the voice said. Different now. Urgent. "Check the door." "Which door?" "The one that wasn't there yesterday." Vera turned. Her front door stood where it always had, white paint peeling near the knob. But beside it, in the wall that had only ever held her daughter's school photos and a mirror from Meredith's grandmother, there was another door. Narrow. Gray. No knob, just a push plate like in a hospital. "Jesus," Vera said. "Don't open it yet," the voice said. "You're not ready." "Ready for what?" "To remember who you were. What you did. Why they've been calling." The voice paused. "Why you asked me to call." Vera crossed to the new door. Put her palm against it. Cold. Vibrating slightly, like something on the other side was moving, pacing, waiting. "I don't remember asking anyone to call." "You will," the voice said. "The parking lot. The window. The woman in the next bed. She wasn't a patient, Vera. She was a guard." The door under Vera's hand shuddered once. Through the wood, she heard footsteps.

Chapter

Three

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One ought not to touch strange doors. This, Vera understood with the clarity reserved for those truths learned young and buried deep. Her mother had said it, though in what context memory declined to specify. Doors were thresholds. One did not cross them lightly. She withdrew her hand. The gun felt absurd suddenly, a prop from someone else's life. Yet when she tried to set it down, her fingers would not release it. "The guard," Vera said into the telephone. "What was she guarding?" The voice did not answer immediately. In the silence, Vera became aware of other sounds: the refrigerator's hum, the house settling, and beneath these, something rhythmic. Footsteps, yes, but not from beyond the gray door. These came from above. From the bedroom she had just left. "You," the voice said at last. "She was guarding you." "That makes no sense." "Doesn't it? Think. Before the hospital. Before the forgetting. What were you?" The badge in her pocket grew warm. Vera drew it out, held it to the light. Detective Sergeant, it read. Vera Halstead. Metropolitan Police. Retired 2003. Twenty years ago, then. Twenty years of what? She had memories of those years: Meredith's wedding, the garden she had planted, the book club that met Thursdays. Ordinary things. The mortar of an ordinary life. But mortar could conceal cavities. She knew this. Had known this. The footsteps upstairs ceased. A door closed. Not slammed, simply drawn shut with the soft click of a latch

catching. She had closed no door up there. Had left everything open, the way one did when one lived alone and had nothing to hide. "What did I do?" Vera asked. "Your job," the voice said. "Too well. You found the door. The first door. Do you remember?" She did not. But her body did. Her legs carried her to the kitchen, to the drawer beside the sink. Her hands knew which one without looking, knew to push aside the dish towels and expired coupons to find the small brass key taped to the drawer's underside. The key was warm. Recently handled. Impossible. "Someone's been in my house," Vera said. "Someone's been in your house for three weeks," the voice replied. "Since you came back. Since you started forgetting." Vera returned to the gray door. The key in her hand was too small for any normal lock, the sort one might use for a diary or a cash box. Childish things. Yet when she examined the door more closely, she saw that where a knob should be, there was instead a small brass plate. And in the plate, a keyhole. "If I open this," Vera said, "shall I remember?" "You'll remember why you wanted to forget." "That isn't an answer." "It's the only answer that matters." Upstairs, something dragged across the floor. Heavy. Deliberate. The sound stopped at the top of the stairs. Vera's training surfaced through the chemical fog. One did not investigate strange noises alone. One called for backup. One secured the perimeter. One did not insert mysterious keys into impossible doors while holding a weapon one had supposedly surrendered two decades prior. One did all of these things anyway, if one was Vera Halstead. Detective Sergeant. The woman who found the first door. She placed the key in the lock. It slid home as though the mechanism had been waiting for it. Before she could turn it, the telephone spoke again. "The pills," the voice said. "You'll want to leave them behind. Where you're going, forgetting won't help you. It never did." "Where am I going?" "Back," the voice said. "To the parking lot that wasn't a parking lot. To the window that showed you what you shouldn't have seen. To the moment you understood what was actually being kept in that hospital." The thing at the top of the stairs began to descend. Slowly. One step. Two. Vera counted them without meaning to.

An old habit. Always count. Always know how much time you have. She turned the key. The lock opened with a sound like bones clicking into place. The gray door swung inward, revealing not a room but a corridor. Hospital white. Fluorescent. The smell of antiseptic and something underneath it, sweet and wrong. Rotting flowers. Spoiled fruit. The particular stench of lies maintained too long. "Who are you?" Vera asked the voice one final time. "You know who I am," the voice said. "You asked me to call if you forgot. If the pills worked too well. If you started to believe their version." Behind her, the footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs. Ahead, the corridor stretched into fluorescent infinity. Vera stepped through the door.

Chapter

Four

written by typewriter_tom

The corridor had no doors except the one behind her. Vera walked anyway. The gun hung at her side. Her shoes made no sound on the tile. That was wrong. Tile echoed. Hospitals were never silent. The fluorescent lights ran in rows toward a vanishing point that kept receding. She walked faster. The point stayed distant. Basic geometry didn't work here. Neither did basic anything. The smell got worse. Under the rot was something chemical. Not antiseptic. Formaldehyde, maybe. Or embalming fluid. Things used to preserve what shouldn't be preserved. Her phone rang. Impossible. She'd left it in the kitchen. But the ringing came from her pocket. She pulled out a cell phone she'd never owned. Sleek. Black. No brand markings. She answered. "Stop walking," the voice said. "There's nowhere to stop." "Look left." She did. A window had appeared in the wall. Not set into it. Appeared. Like a photograph developing. Through it: the parking lot. The same one from the hospital. The one she'd seen from the room she didn't remember entering. But the parking lot was empty of cars. Just painted lines on asphalt. And in the center, a door. Standing alone. Freestanding. No building attached. Just a door in a frame in the middle of painted spaces. "That's where they bring them through," the voice said. "Bring what through?" "The ones who forget. The ones the pills work on. The ones who go home and live normal lives and never wonder why they lost

three days." Vera's hand found her pocket. The pills were still there. She pulled one out. Held it to the light. Inside the orange coating, something moved. Writhed. Tiny and white and segmented. She dropped it. "You saw this before," the voice said. "Three weeks ago. You were undercover. Posing as a patient. We got a tip that the hospital was running trials. Experimental memory treatments. FDA hadn't approved them but people were signing up anyway. Desperate people. People with Alzheimer's. Dementia. People who'd do anything to keep their minds." The window showed the door in the parking lot opening. Something stepped through. Tall. Wrong proportions. Limbs too long. Head too smooth. "You got admitted through the ER," the voice continued. "Fake symptoms. Fake history. You were supposed to observe for seventy-two hours and report back. But you saw the door. You looked through that window and you saw what came through and you couldn't let it go." Vera remembered. Not all of it. Fragments. The woman in the next bed. Not a guard. A handler. Watching to make sure Vera took her pills. Took them and forgot. Forgot what she'd seen. What she'd photographed. Her hand went to her other pocket. Found a phone. Her real phone. Old. Battered. Department issue from before smartphones. She pulled it up. One photo in the gallery. Taken through a window. Showing the parking lot. Showing the door. Showing what stepped through. Except the image kept shifting. Every time she blinked it changed. The thing was tall then short. Human then not. Solid then translucent. Like her mind couldn't hold the shape. "They gave you the pills in the hospital," the voice said. "Told you it was standard post-admission medication. You took them because that's what a patient would do. And you forgot. Forgot why you were there. Forgot what you'd seen. Forgot everything except that someone needed to call you. Someone needed to remind you." "So I called myself," Vera said. Silence on the line. "I called myself," she said again. "Set up some kind of delayed system. A reminder. Because I knew the pills would work." "Yes." The corridor ended. Just stopped. A white wall appeared ten feet ahead. No warning. No gradual closure. Just wall where corridor had been. On the wall: another door. This one she

recognized. Her front door. White paint. Peeling knob. "If I go back," Vera said, "will I forget again?" "Only if you take the pills." "And if I don't take them?" "Then you'll remember. And they'll know you remember. And they'll come for you." Behind the wall, something scratched. Steady. Rhythmic. Like fingernails on wood. Vera raised the gun. Pointed it at her own front door. "What's behind it?" she asked. "Everything you tried to forget," the voice said. "Everything they wanted you to forget. The door. The things that come through. The reason the hospital exists. The reason the pills exist. All of it." The scratching stopped. The door opened.

Chapter

Five

written by Dario Selo

Meredith stood in the doorway. Not the corridor version of the door (if corridors could have versions, if doors could be both one thing and another simultaneously). The actual door. Her daughter. In jeans and the Northwestern sweatshirt Vera had given her for Christmas. Holding a casserole dish. Steam rising from under the foil. "Mom?" Meredith said. "Why are you pointing a gun at me?" Vera lowered the weapon. The corridor was gone. She stood in her own living room. Morning light through the windows. The clock read 7:34. Impossible. She'd entered the gray door at night. Had walked for what felt like hours. Yet here was morning, and here was Meredith, and here was a casserole that smelled like her grandmother's chicken recipe, which meant this was real, or meant Vera had learned nothing about what real meant. "I wasn't," Vera said. Then, because that was obviously a lie, "I was cleaning it." "You were pointing a loaded weapon at your front door." "Yes." Meredith set the casserole on the entry table. Slowly. The way one moved around unstable things. "Did you take your pills this morning?" Vera's hand went to her pocket. Found the pill she'd dropped. Picked it up from where it had landed on the tile. Except she wasn't on tile anymore. She was on carpet. The pills in her pocket (when had she put them back?) felt heavier than they should. "No," Vera said. "How many days have you missed?" This was the question, wasn't it? Not whether the corridor had

been real. Whether anything was real. Whether memory could be trusted when memory itself was the thing being amended. Vera had spent twenty years in police work learning to doubt her eyes. Trust the evidence. Trust the timeline. But what did one do when the timeline looped back on itself, when the evidence showed different things depending on whether you'd taken your medicine? "I don't know," Vera said. Meredith closed the door behind her. Locked it. The deadbolt clicked with a sound like a key turning in a much smaller lock. She looked at Vera with an expression that might have been concern or might have been calculation. Hard to tell. Had always been hard to tell with Meredith, who'd inherited her father's poker face along with his tendency toward secrets. "The hospital called," Meredith said. "They said you missed your follow-up appointment." "What hospital?" "Mom." "No. Which hospital? Name it." Meredith paused. Blinkered. "Saint Catherine's." "There's no Saint Catherine's in this city." "There's one on Ashland Avenue. We drove past it on the way home. You don't remember?" Vera didn't. But she also didn't remember not remembering, which was different. Memory wasn't supposed to have a null state. One either remembered or one didn't. One didn't remember the absence of remembering unless someone pointed it out. Unless someone made you look at the gap and notice its shape. "Why are you really here?" Vera asked. "I brought breakfast. I'm worried about you. Choose your favorite reason." "You said the hospital called. How did they have your number?" "You listed me as your emergency contact." "When?" "When they admitted you. Mom, please. Put the gun away and let's have something to eat and talk about the assisted living brochures. I brought three options. Good facilities. You'd have your own apartment. People around if you need help." The gun was still in Vera's hand. She'd forgotten she was holding it, which suggested something about her mental state, though what exactly remained unclear. She set it on the entry table next to the casserole. The two objects looked absurd together. Suburban menace. American gothic with cream of mushroom soup. "Take me to the hospital," Vera said. "I just told you. You missed

the appointment." "Not for an appointment. I want to see it. The building. The parking lot. I want to stand there and look at it and know whether it's the same one." "The same one as what?" "As the one I remember. Or don't remember. Or remember not remembering." Meredith picked up the casserole. Held it like a shield, which perhaps it was. Perhaps that's what daughters did. Brought comfort food and locked doors and tried to build walls between their mothers and the things that wanted in. "Okay," Meredith said. "We'll go. But first you need to eat something. And take your pills. Please." She pulled a bottle from her purse. Set it on the table next to the gun. The pills rattled.

Chapter

Six

written by Cora Lindgren

The rattle didn't stop. Vera watched the bottle vibrate against the wood grain, tiny tremors like something alive wanted out. Or in. Her mouth tasted like copper. She'd bitten her cheek without noticing. "Those aren't mine," Vera said. Meredith's hand stayed on the casserole. "They're the same prescription." "Look at the label." Her daughter picked up the bottle, angled it toward the window light. The pharmacy sticker was there, CVS logo, Vera's name, the doctor's signature. But underneath the label, the plastic was discolored. Not yellow from age. Darker. Like something inside had leaked. Meredith's thumb rubbed the plastic. Stopped. "It's sticky." "Open it." "Mom, this is paranoid behavior." "Then humor me." The safety cap came off with a crack. Meredith tipped one pill into her palm. The orange coating looked normal. Pharmaceutical smooth. But when she tilted her hand, the pill rolled, and in the depression her palm made, Vera saw it: a hairline split in the coating. Something white pressed against the gap from inside. Meredith dropped it. The pill hit the table and broke open. What spilled out wasn't powder. It moved. Threadlike. Pale as grubs in soil. The strands curled, seeking moisture, and where they touched the wood they left wet marks. "What the fuck." Meredith's voice went flat. Training kicked in. Vera had forgotten her daughter had done two years as a paralegal in the prosecutor's office, had sat through evidence

presentations, knew contamination when she saw it. "What the fuck is that." "The pills they want me to take." Meredith grabbed the gun. Pointed it at the writhing mess on the table. Her hand was steady. That was good. That was her father's training too, the weekend range trips he'd insisted on before the divorce. "How long have you known?" "Since last night. Or three weeks. Depends which timeline we're in." "Mom." "I'm not being cute. I walked through a door that wasn't there yesterday. Spent what felt like hours in a hospital corridor. Came back and it was morning and you were here with food I can smell but haven't seen you make in six years because you hate cooking." The casserole sat between them. Steam still rose from under the foil. "I made it last night," Meredith said slowly. "After you called me crying. Saying you didn't know where you were. That your kitchen looked wrong." "I didn't call you." "You did. At two in the morning. I have it on my phone." She pulled it out one-handed, gun still trained on the table. Scrolled. Turned the screen toward Vera. The call log showed it: 2:17 AM. Duration: four minutes. Vera's landline sat on the kitchen counter where she'd left it. Receiver in the cradle. She'd been in the corridor then. Or thought she had been. "What did I say?" "That the walls were breathing. That you could see through the floor to another floor underneath. That someone was in the house but you couldn't find them." Meredith's voice cracked. "You sounded terrified. I got in the car but by the time I got here you'd hung up. Wouldn't answer when I called back. I sat outside in the driveway until sunrise to make sure you were okay." The gun was shaking now. Vera reached for it, gentle, and Meredith let her take it. Her daughter's palm was slick with sweat. "The parking lot," Vera said. "We're going now." "We should call someone." "Who? The hospital that might not exist? The department I retired from twenty years ago?" Vera checked the gun's safety, set it down. Picked up the casserole. Beneath the foil: chicken and rice and cream sauce, exactly like the recipe. Still hot. Her stomach clenched with hunger she hadn't noticed. "When did you put this in the oven?" "Six this morning." An hour and a half ago. Time enough to cook and cool slightly, but this was hotter than that.

This was just-out-of-the-oven temperature. This was impossible, except everything was impossible now, so why not casseroles that defied thermodynamics. Vera set it down. "We're leaving it here." "It's just food." "Nothing is just anything anymore." Meredith looked at the pills scattered on the table, the white threads dissolving into damp streaks. "No," she said. "I guess it's not."

Chapter

Seven

written by jmarsh

The car held the particular cold of machines left overnight, metal and vinyl that had settled into the exact temperature of abandonment. Vera's door protested when she opened it, the hinge shrieking in a register that sent birds exploding from the neighbor's oak. Three crows. She counted without meaning to. Always three. Meredith drove. This, Vera understood, was itself a statement: her daughter's hands on the wheel, her jaw set in that way that recalled courtrooms and depositions and the careful architecture of control. The gun sat in Vera's lap, wrapped in a dish towel because one did not simply hold weapons in moving vehicles, even when one had carried them for twenty years prior. The weight of it pressed against her thigh. They turned onto Ashland Avenue. Vera knew this street. Had known it. Four blocks of medical buildings constructed in the architectural language of institutional reassurance: brick facades, handicap ramps, parking lots sized for emergency and routine in equal measure. She had driven past these buildings a thousand times. Had she? "There," Meredith said, pointing. Saint Catherine's Regional Medical Center occupied the corner lot where Vera remembered, with absolute certainty, a Vietnamese restaurant had stood. She could recall the menu board in the window, the gilt lettering, the smell of star anise that drifted into the street. Yet here: four stories of beige brick, windows reflecting morning light in

uniform rows. A sign, professionally weathered, suggesting decades of operation. The parking lot spread before it in neat diagonal lines. Empty. Not empty of cars. Empty of correctness. The asphalt was too new, the paint too bright. No oil stains. No weeds in the expansion cracks. No cigarette butts near the entrance where medical staff slipped out between shifts to feed their habits. "Pull in," Vera said. Meredith's hands tightened on the wheel. She pulled in anyway, choosing a space near the building's entrance. The car ticked as the engine cooled. Neither of them moved to open their doors. The parking lot extended behind the building, curving out of sight. In the center of the visible section, exactly where the photograph on Vera's old phone had shown it: a door. Freestanding. No structure attached. Just frame and door and the particular wrongness of architecture asserting itself without foundation. "You see it," Vera said. Not a question. "I see something." Meredith's voice had gone thin. "A maintenance shed, maybe. Or a electrical box housing." "Look again." Her daughter looked. The thing that was not a maintenance shed stood seven feet tall, the door itself a gray that matched the one in Vera's house. As they watched, the door opened. Not pushed. Not pulled. Simply opened, as though the concept of barrier had briefly forgotten itself. What emerged was a man. Approximately a man. The proportions were correct if one didn't look directly, if one kept him in peripheral vision where the mind might paper over the small discrepancies. But Vera looked directly. She was a detective. Had been a detective. The difference between was and had been suddenly felt insufficient. The man's feet touched asphalt with no sound. He walked toward the hospital entrance, his gait suggesting someone who had studied walking but had never quite mastered the rhythm of it. At the door, he paused. Turned. Looked directly at their car. His face was anyone's face. Everyone's. The features shifted when Vera blinked, rearranging themselves into different configurations of ordinary. The only constant: his mouth, which was too wide. Which showed too many teeth when he smiled. He raised one hand. Waved. Meredith made a sound, something between whimper and retch.

"Drive," Vera said. "He's just waving." "Drive now." But Meredith's hand had already moved to the ignition. The engine turned over, caught, and the man's smile widened. He lowered his hand. Pulled something from his pocket: a phone. Old style. Brick-shaped. He put it to his ear. In Vera's lap, wrapped in its dish towel, her cell phone began to ring. Not the ringtone she'd set. Not any ringtone. Three rings, measured and identical. The same pattern. The same interval she'd been counting for three weeks, or three days, or however long this had been happening before she started remembering that she'd forgotten. Vera unwrapped the gun. Answered the phone. "Detective Halstead," the voice said, and it was his voice now, the man in the parking lot whose mouth wasn't moving but whose teeth caught the light. "We'd like you to come inside. We have so much to discuss about your treatment."

Chapter

Eight

written by Dan Okafor

Vera hung up. This seemed the correct response to invitations from things that wore faces like rental cars wore air fresheners. "Go," she told Meredith. The car jerked backward. Meredith's competence at parallel parking did not extend to panicked reversing, and they clipped the bumper of a sedan that hadn't been there thirty seconds ago. The impact sounded wet. Meredith didn't stop. She wrenched the wheel, tires screaming against asphalt that was no longer quite so clean. Dark streaks appeared in their wake, though whether from rubber or something else, Vera chose not to determine. The man with too many teeth stood watching. He'd lowered the phone but hadn't moved otherwise. Other figures emerged from the hospital entrance. Three of them. Always three. They walked with the same studied gait, like actors who'd rehearsed movement but never lived inside it. Meredith hit Ashland doing forty in a twenty-five. Vera didn't tell her to slow down. Her daughter's hands were bone-white on the wheel, and her breathing had gone shallow in a way that suggested imminent breakdown. One of them needed to stay functional. Vera had more practice at this. "The restaurant," Meredith said. "Pho Ha. We went there after my college orientation. You had the spring rolls." "I remember." "It was there. Right where that building is. I ate there three months ago." "I believe you." "So which is real?" This was the question, wasn't it? Vera watched strip

malls slide past, each storefront exactly where she expected it. The dry cleaner. The insurance office. The bank branch with the chipped sign. Memory mapped to reality with perfect correspondence. Except for the restaurant that had become a hospital. Except for the door in her living room. Except for the pills with parasites inside them. Her phone rang again. Same pattern. She pulled the battery out this time, which should have been impossible with a phone manufactured after 2015, but the back panel came off easily and the battery slid into her palm. Still warm. Still vibrating with incoming call that had nowhere to go. "The badge," Vera said. "In my pocket. When did I retire?" "Two thousand three. I was in high school." "What was I working on? Last case." Meredith accelerated through a yellow light. "I don't know. You never talked about work." "I talked about everything. I never shut up about cases. You complained about it." Her daughter's jaw worked. "You did. You talked all the time. About. About." She trailed off. Her hands loosened slightly on the wheel. "I can't remember what you talked about." "Because I didn't. Because whatever I was doing, it was the kind of work one didn't bring home." Vera found the badge again. The expiration date read 2003, but beneath that, stamped in smaller text: Special Investigations Unit. She didn't remember a special investigations unit. The department had homicide, vice, fraud. The normal architecture of metropolitan policing. Special suggested something else. Suggested doors that weren't supposed to exist and things that came through them. They pulled into Vera's driveway. The house looked correct. White paint, peeling knob, garden that needed weeding. But next door, where the Hendersons had lived for fifteen years, the house was gone. Not demolished. Gone. A flat expanse of grass extended where structure should have been, as though the lot had never held anything at all. "Meredith," Vera said carefully. "Describe our neighbors." "The Hendersons. Margaret and Paul. They have two kids." "What are the kids' names?" Silence. "What does Margaret look like?" More silence. Then, "I've met them dozens of times." "I know." "I've been to their barbecues. I've seen their Christmas card." "Yes." Meredith put the car in

park but didn't cut the engine. "Mom. What did you find?" Vera looked at the house. At the gray door that would be waiting inside, if patterns held. At the gun in her lap that she'd supposedly turned in twenty years ago. "The first door," she said. "Apparently I found the first door." "Where does it go?" "I don't know yet. But I think it's time we found out." She opened the car door. The air smelled like cut grass and gasoline and underneath that, very faintly, formaldehyde. The smell of preservation. Of things kept past their natural ending. Behind them, three figures rounded the corner onto her street. Walking in perfect synchronization. Smiling with mouths that held too many teeth. Vera chambered a round. "Come on." They went inside.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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