

FAMILY



What We Didn't Say

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Iris Beddoe
Two	Dan Okafor
Three	Sammy Hall
Four	Ruth Ann Keller
Five	Colin McAteer
Six	Sasha Loomis
Seven	Priya Nair
Eight	Dario Selo

Chapter

One

written by Iris Beddoe

The envelope wasn't sealed. Just tucked. The way you leave something for someone when you trust they'll find it, or maybe when you don't care if they do. Inside: a photograph, corners soft with age. Three women at this same table, though the room behind them looked different. Wallpaper where now there was paint. A clock that no longer hung anywhere. The women's faces were turned slightly away from the camera, as if they'd been caught mid-conversation, as if the photographer had interrupted something. On the back, in that same unfamiliar hand: We were never who they said. She put the photo down. Picked it up again. The middle woman wore a bracelet, thin silver, that looked like the one currently cold against her own wrist. The one her mother said had been her grandmother's. But her grandmother was supposed to be the woman on the left, wasn't she? The one with the severe mouth and the carefully neutral expression. Unless. The drawer held other things. A receipt from a diner three states away, dated two weeks before her grandfather's funeral. A ticket stub, orchestra seats, for a play that had closed in 1962. A key on a blue ribbon. A folded paper that, when opened, revealed itself to be a menu from a restaurant that had never existed in this town, she was certain of that. Or maybe she wasn't certain. Maybe she'd driven past that corner a thousand times without seeing. Her phone buzzed. Her mother, asking where she was,

everyone was waiting, the service would start soon. She almost didn't answer. Almost stayed there with the drawer pulled open, with these objects that refused to make sense in the way objects were supposed to. But she went. Tucked the envelope in her jacket pocket, where it sat against her ribs like a second heartbeat. At the service, she watched faces. Tried to map them onto the photograph. Her mother's jaw, did it match the woman on the right? And that aunt who rarely spoke at gatherings, who always sat at the far end of the table, was there something in her eyes that echoed the middle woman's expression? The priest spoke about continuity. About legacy. About how the dead live on in those who remember them. She thought about the handwriting she'd never seen. About being named in it. After, at the house, the table was laid with food no one was eating. People stood in clusters, holding small plates, speaking in voices that were trying to find the right register between grief and relief. Her mother moved through the rooms like she was looking for something. Kept stopping at doorways, at windows. "Did you look in the drawer?" The question came from behind her. An older cousin, one she'd maybe met twice. The woman's eyes were steady, waiting. "I did." "And?" "I don't know what I found." The cousin nodded. Sipped from a cup that looked like it held only ice. "None of us do. That's the point, I think. That's what they left us." She gestured at the table. "You know it seats sixteen, if you use all the leaves. But I've never seen more than eight here at once. Even at weddings. Even at Christmas." "Why?" "Maybe there are always eight who can't be in the same room." The cousin set down her cup. "Or maybe there are always eight who aren't here at all." She wanted to ask more, but her mother appeared, touching her elbow, asking her to help in the kitchen. And when she turned back, the cousin was already gone, or had never quite been standing there in the first place. In her pocket, the envelope seemed heavier. The photograph inside it, those three women, their faces turned away. We were never who they said. Which meant someone had been saying. Someone had been deciding. Someone had been writing the story that wasn't true. She touched the bracelet on her

wrist. Felt it move, loose, like it had been worn by someone with different bones.

Chapter

Two

written by Dan Okafor

The kitchen smelled like coffee that had been sitting too long and casserole dishes going tepid. Her mother stood at the sink with her back to the room, hands motionless in soapy water, staring out at the garden where nothing was blooming. "You should eat something," her mother said, still not turning. "So should you." "I'm not hungry for any of this." It was an odd way to phrase it. Not hungry for this, specifically. As if there were some other food, somewhere else, that might satisfy. She pulled the photograph from her pocket. Set it on the counter between a butter dish and someone's abandoned wine glass. Her mother's hands went still in the water. "Where did you find that." Not a question. A fact she already knew. "The drawer. With my name on it." Her mother dried her hands, very slowly, on a towel that had been embroidered with flowers by someone, probably, who'd also sat at that table. She didn't look at the photograph. Looked instead at the bracelet on her daughter's wrist. "I need you to put that back." "The bracelet?" "All of it. The envelope. Whatever else you took." "I didn't take anything. Someone left it for me." "They didn't know what they were doing." Her mother's voice had gone flat, airless. "They got confused at the end. Mixed things up." "Who's the woman in the middle?" Finally her mother picked up the photograph. Held it at an angle, like she was trying to see it as someone else might. A small sound escaped her, not quite a laugh. "That's the

question, isn't it." Through the doorway, voices rose and fell. Someone was telling a story about the deceased, something involving a Christmas ham and a misunderstanding at the butcher's. Laughter, the relieved kind that happens at funerals when people remember they're allowed. "She was supposed to be at the service," her mother said. "The woman who wrote your name. She was supposed to come, years ago, and she didn't. And then it was too late. Or maybe it was always too late. I can't remember anymore what we were waiting for." She thought of the cousin's words. Eight who can't be in the same room. Eight who aren't here at all. "Mom. How many sisters did Grandma have?" Her mother set the photo down, face down, like it might be watching. "That depends on how you count." "What does that mean?" "It means some people get subtracted. Written out. It means families decide who gets to stay in the story and who doesn't, and sometimes the ones who get erased, they leave pieces of themselves behind anyway. In drawers. In handwriting you don't recognize." Her mother touched the back of the photograph, one finger, like she was reading Braille. "In daughters." The word hung there. Daughters. Plural or singular. Hers or someone else's. From the other room, her aunt's voice, the quiet one: "Has anyone seen the guest book? I thought we put it by the door." Her mother's hand moved to her own wrist, where no bracelet hung. She rubbed the bare skin there, thumb moving in circles. "There were eight chairs at that table for most of my childhood," she said. "Then six. Then four. Now we're trying to figure out how to sit at it with three. And you're standing here asking me questions that don't have good answers, only true ones." "Tell me a true one then." Her mother finally looked at her. Really looked. Eyes mapping her face like she was checking for resemblances, for echoes, for proof of something. "The woman in the middle," she said, "kept better records than the rest of us. That's why you have her bracelet. That's why you have her handwriting. That's why she knew your name before you were born.

Chapter

Three

written by Sammy Hall

Look, I'm not saying my mother was making sense. But I'm not saying she wasn't, either. That's the thing about funerals, right? Everything goes sideways. People say stuff that sounds like riddles but might just be the truth wearing its weird clothes. I turned the photograph back over. The three women looked even less related than before, now that I was studying them. Different noses. Different ways of holding their shoulders. But the bracelet, yeah, that was clear as anything. Same delicate chain. Same little clasp that kept coming undone at the worst moments, like when you're carrying groceries or trying to shake someone's hand without seeming rude. "Before I was born," I said. "How long before?" My mother was doing that thing where she rearranges items on the counter without actually moving them anywhere. Butter dish to the left three inches. Back. Wine glass rotated forty-five degrees. "Does it matter?" "I think it might matter a lot, actually." She picked up the photo again, and this time she really examined it. Squinting at the background, at the wallpaper, at the clock that used to hang somewhere. "1978," she said finally. "Or maybe '79. Before I was married. Before you were even a thought." Math happened in my head without my permission. The cousin had said eight who can't be in the same room. My mother had just admitted we were down to three. That's five missing. Five people subtracted from the story, as she'd put it. Five

empty chairs getting emptier. "The key," I said. "The one on the blue ribbon. What's it for?" "I don't know what you're talking about." But her face did a thing. A small thing. A flicker around the eyes that meant she knew exactly which key I meant, had maybe held it herself, had maybe even been the one to tie that specific ribbon. From the living room: "We should probably think about clearing some of these dishes." My aunt again, the quiet one. Her voice doing that thing where it's making a suggestion but also asking permission, like she's not sure she's allowed to have opinions about plates. "In a minute," my mother called back. Then, quieter, to me: "The key doesn't open anything in this house." "Then why keep it?" "Because some locks aren't in houses." I waited. She was going to say more, I could feel it. The air had that pressurized quality, like before thunder. "There's a storage unit," she said. "About forty minutes from here. Has been paid up for, god, thirty years? Maybe longer. Automatically deducts from an account none of us touch. I've never been inside. Your grandmother made me promise." "Promise what?" "Not to open it until someone asked about the bracelet." The bracelet was suddenly very cold against my skin. Or maybe my skin was suddenly very hot. Hard to tell which. "I'm asking about the bracelet." "I know you are." My mother pulled open a drawer, not the drawer, just a regular kitchen drawer full of rubber bands and twist ties and batteries that might be dead. She moved things around like she was looking for something, but I got the feeling she just needed her hands busy. "The receipt you found. The diner three states away. That's about forty minutes from the storage place, depending on traffic." "You've been there." "Once. Right after your grandfather's funeral. I sat in the parking lot for two hours and couldn't make myself go inside. Came home. Told myself I'd go back." She closed the drawer. "Never did." The cousin appeared in the doorway, the older one with the steady eyes. She was holding the guest book, but something about the way she held it made it seem like a prop. Like she'd grabbed the first thing she saw as an excuse to come find us. "It's time," she said. "Time for what?" I asked. She looked at my mother, not me. "You know what." My mother's face went

strange. Younger somehow. Scared in a way I'd never seen her scared. "She's not ready." "Neither were you. Neither was I. That's not how this works." I touched the envelope in my pocket. The handwriting I'd never seen. My name in it. "Somebody want to tell me what we're talking about?" The cousin smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. It was the kind of smile you make when you're about to tell someone that the map they've been reading is upside down, has always been upside down, and now they have to find their way back from wherever they've been going. "The table," she said, "seats sixteen. But there's a seventeenth chair."

Chapter

Four

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One shall find it curious, perhaps, that a piece of furniture might command such attention at a time when grief ought to hold precedence. Yet the cousin's words settled upon the kitchen with an authority that transcended mere eccentricity. A seventeenth chair. One had not observed it, naturally. One observes what one is prepared to see. The mother's hand went to her throat, fingers seeking a necklace that was not there. She had worn one yesterday, if memory served. A small gold thing, unremarkable. Now the neck was bare, and the gesture seemed practiced, habitual, as though she had been reaching for absent ornaments all her life. "Show her," the cousin said. "Not today." "Especially today." They spoke as women do when a script has been rehearsed for years, when the words themselves matter less than the fact of their exchange. One might have felt intrusive, standing there with the photograph still warm from being held, but one suspects that intrusion was rather the point. Some performances require an audience to become real. The quiet aunt appeared behind the cousin. One had not heard her approach. She carried no dishes, no purpose that would justify her presence, and yet she arranged herself in the doorframe as though she had been summoned. "The unit," she said. Simply that. The unit. One's mother turned back to the sink, though there was nothing in it now but gray water and the ghost of soap. "She doesn't need to see

what's there." "Someone decided she did," the quiet aunt replied. "Someone went to considerable trouble." The bracelet had grown heavier. One does not believe in such things, as a rule, in objects gaining weight through circumstance, yet the silver pressed against the bone in a manner distinctly different from how it had felt this morning. One removed it. Set it beside the photograph. The two artifacts lay there, witnesses to something one could not yet parse. "What is in the storage unit," one asked, endeavoring to keep one's voice level, unmarked by the anxiety that was gathering behind the sternum like a fist. The three women looked at one another. Some communication passed between them, quick as light, silent as thought. The mother dried her hands again though they were already dry. The cousin straightened the guest book she still carried. The quiet aunt did nothing, which was itself a kind of doing. "Records," the mother said finally. "Letters. A file box full of birth certificates, some with the same names, different dates. Photographs of women at tables. Always tables. Sometimes this table, sometimes others. There is a map, marked with cities where none of us have admitted to living. There is a dress." She paused. The quality of the pause suggested that the dress was important, more important perhaps than the documents, than the photographs, than the accumulated weight of all that paper. "It fits you," the quiet aunt said, addressing one directly for the first time. "We measured. Years ago. We knew." One wished to ask how such a thing could be known, how measurements could be taken of a child, an infant, a person not yet formed, and be certain they would hold true decades hence. But the question felt foolish even unspoken. These women dealt in certainties that had nothing to do with tape measures or logic. "The woman in the middle of the photograph," one said instead, choosing words with care, "kept records because she knew something was being erased. She was documenting what others wished forgotten." "Yes," said the cousin. "And I am meant to continue this work." "Not meant," the mother said, her back still turned. "Chosen. There is a difference." "By whom?" The quiet aunt smiled, and it was terrible, that smile, gentle and sad and utterly

without comfort. "By the ones who aren't here," she said. "By the eight empty chairs. By everyone who got subtracted and decided that subtraction was not, after all, permanent." From the other room came the sounds of departure. Voices saying farewell, saying thank you, saying the things one says when death has been properly mourned and life must resume. Soon the house would empty. Soon one would be left with these three women and their strange inheritance of locked rooms and impossible chairs. One picked up the bracelet. Put it back on. Felt the clasp close against skin that was, one now understood, not entirely one's own. "The key," one said. "Someone shall need to give me the key.

Chapter

Five

written by Colin McAteer

The quiet aunt reaches into her cardigan pocket. The pocket sags with the shape of something that's been carried there for hours, maybe days. She pulls out the key on its blue ribbon and holds it suspended between them, letting it rotate slowly in the air like a question mark made of brass and cloth. "Not someone," she says. "Me." She places it in the younger woman's palm. The metal is warm. Body temperature. The ribbon smells faintly of lavender, the way old women's drawers smell when they've kept sachets there since Kennedy was president. The mother turns from the sink. "Ruth, you can't just, " "I can. I am." Ruth. So the quiet aunt has a name. She's been at every holiday dinner, every birthday, always at the table's far end near the kitchen door, and no one has said her name aloud in the younger woman's hearing until this moment. The cousin closes the guest book with a soft thump. "She's not wrong. The instructions were clear." "What instructions?" The younger woman's fingers close around the key. "Who left instructions?" "The woman in the middle," Ruth says. She moves into the kitchen properly now, no longer hovering in thresholds. She's shorter than she seemed in the doorway. Solid. The kind of woman who looks like she's been seventy for thirty years and will stay seventy for thirty more. "She left a letter. Sealed. Dated. We were supposed to open it when the next one showed up wearing the bracelet without being told to." "I didn't, " The

younger woman stops. Thinks back. This morning, getting dressed for the funeral, reaching for jewelry. The bracelet had been on her dresser, though she couldn't remember taking it out of her jewelry box. Had assumed she'd left it there last time. "I don't remember putting this on." "No," her mother says quietly. "You wouldn't." Through the doorway, the last of the funeral guests are collecting coats. Someone is asking about leftovers, whether the potato salad should go home with them or stay. Normal questions. The kind of questions that belong to a world where furniture doesn't sprout extra chairs and dead women don't leave maps to their secrets. Ruth pulls out a chair. Not the seventeenth, just a regular one. She sits. Folds her hands on the table in front of her like she's about to lead a meeting. "The storage unit is in Millerton. Forty-three minutes if you take Route 9. The code for the lock is 1978. The year of the photograph. Everything inside is labeled. The dress is in a garment bag on the left. You'll need to try it on." "Why would I, " "Because it has pockets," the cousin says. "And the pockets have things in them. Things that were put there the day the photograph was taken. Things that couldn't be left in this house." The younger woman looks at her mother. "You've known about this my whole life." "Longer." Her mother's voice is steady now, resigned. "I knew before you were born. Before I was married. Before I understood what I was agreeing to when I said I'd keep the table in the family." "What does the table have to do with, " "Everything." Ruth's hands are still folded, but her knuckles have gone white. "The table is the record. Every mark, every scratch, every water ring. Sixteen chairs for sixteen positions. Sixteen roles. Sixteen women who were supposed to sit down and agree on what the family story would be." "And the seventeenth?" "The seventeenth," her mother says, "is for the one who writes it down differently." The front door closes. Voices fade. The house settles into the particular silence that follows crowds, the kind of quiet that feels louder than noise. Someone has left the television on in the living room, murmuring news about weather systems and traffic delays. The younger woman slides the key onto the ribbon around her neck. It hangs there next to her collarbone, a

small weight that feels like a promise or a threat. "When do I go?" Ruth stands. Pushes her chair back in, careful, aligning it exactly with the table's edge. "Now would be traditional. While everyone's gone. While you still have the choice to turn around." "And if I don't go?" The three women look at each other. Then her mother says, "Then someone else will. Eventually. But the handwriting on that envelope is forty years old, and it has your name. Not a name. Your specific name. So I don't think waiting is really an option anymore." The younger woman touches the key. "Okay," she says. "Okay."

Chapter

Six

written by Sasha Loomis

The cousin hands her car keys without being asked. They're on a keychain shaped like a small silver fish, its scales worn smooth from handling. "The Honda. Blue. Parked on the street, not the driveway. The driveway is for people who live here." "I live here." "Not anymore you don't." This should sound dramatic, ominous, but the cousin says it like she's commenting on the weather. A cloud passed. A bird flew. You've stopped living here. The younger woman takes the fish, feels its weight, its blunt snout pressing into her palm. Her mother is wrapping food. Covering dishes with aluminum foil that catches the kitchen light in ways that hurt to look at directly. Bright fractures. A casserole becomes a small silver landscape, topographical, unmappable. "Take the back way out," her mother says to the foil. "Through the garden gate. Your uncle's still in the living room and he'll want to talk about the will." "What about the will?" "Nothing about the will. That's why he'll want to talk." Ruth has moved to the window. She's watching something in the yard. When the younger woman comes to stand beside her, there's nothing there. Just grass. The gate, slightly open. A bird feeder shaped like a small house, empty, swinging. "You'll see her at mile marker forty-one," Ruth says. "See who?" "You'll know. She'll be hitchhiking. Don't pick her up." "Why not?" "Because she's been dead since 1982 and the living shouldn't carpool with the dead. It sets a precedent." The younger

woman waits for someone to laugh, to indicate that this is the kind of joke people make at funerals, dark humor to cut the grief. No one laughs. Ruth keeps watching the empty yard. Her mother keeps wrapping dishes that no one will eat. "I should tell someone where I'm going." "We know where you're going," the cousin says. She's at the table now, pulling leaves out, making it smaller. The wood slides apart with a sound like a sigh. "That's the same as someone knowing." Four leaves come out. The table shrinks. It looks wrong now, too small for the room, like a child's furniture in an adult's space. The cousin stacks the leaves against the wall. Each one has initials carved underneath. E.M. J.T. R.K. The fourth is blank. The younger woman tries to remember the last time she sat at this table for a meal. Thanksgiving? No. Before that. Summer. Corn on the cob. Her grandmother had been alive then, sitting at the head, saying nothing, just watching everyone with eyes that seemed to be memorizing faces. Taking inventory. Counting who was there and noting who wasn't. Eight who can't be in the same room. Eight who aren't here at all. She goes through the garden gate. The Honda is exactly where the cousin said it would be, blue like a bruise, parked half on the curb. Inside it smells like peppermint and old coffee. The steering wheel is adjusted wrong, too close to the seat. She moves it back. Catches her reflection in the rearview mirror and her face looks unfamiliar. Same features, different arrangement. Like someone took a photograph and printed it slightly off-register. The key turns. The engine starts. The radio comes on mid-song, a woman singing about rivers and forgetting. Route 9 is empty for a Tuesday afternoon. She passes a gas station, a farm stand closed for the season, a church with a message board that reads FAITH SEES BEST IN THE DARK. Mile marker thirty-seven. Thirty-eight. Thirty-nine. She thinks about not looking at marker forty-one. About closing her eyes. But that seems more dangerous than seeing, so she keeps them open. Forty-one. A woman stands there in a yellow dress. Thumb out. Hair dark. Face turned away from the road, looking back toward where she came from. The younger woman's foot moves toward the brake without her permission. Then Ruth's words

echo. Don't pick her up. Sets a precedent. She drives past. In the rearview mirror, the woman doesn't move. Doesn't turn. Just stands there, thumb extended, facing the wrong direction, hitchhiking backward into whatever she came from. The storage facility appears at minute forty-two. MILLERTON SECURE STORAGE. Chain-link and corrugated metal. A code box by the gate. She pulls up. The blue ribbon is warm against her neck. Her grandmother's bracelet catches light that isn't there. She types 1978. The gate opens like a mouth.

Chapter

Seven

written by Priya Nair

The storage facility smells like every storage facility: rust and cardboard and the particular sadness of objects nobody could throw away but nobody wanted to look at anymore. Unit 47 is third row back, tucked between someone's boat that will never touch water again and boxes labeled XMAS in optimistic Sharpie from 1993. The padlock is orange. Aggressively orange, the kind of orange that wants you to know it's serious about security. She fumbles the key twice before it slides home. The lock opens with a click that sounds like permission, or maybe a trap springing. Inside: not what she expected. No towers of file boxes, no obvious treasure map taped to the wall. Just a rolling rack with the garment bag, a card table with a banker's box on it, and a folding chair that looks like it came from a church basement. Someone swept in here recently. The concrete floor is clean, which feels wrong. Abandoned storage units should have dust. Should have spiders. Should feel neglected. This feels tended. She unzips the garment bag. The dress is green. Not metaphorically green, not "sage" or "forest" or whatever paint chips call it. Just green. The fabric is heavy, substantial, with buttons up the front made of something that might be shell. She holds it up. It's her size exactly. Of course it is. The pockets are deep, sewn with double stitching, clearly meant to hold things that matter. She reaches into the right one. Her fingers find paper. An envelope, smaller than the

first one, unsealed. Inside: a birth certificate. The name says Margaret Ruth Coleman. Birth date December 3, 1951. Mother's name: Dorothy Frances Coleman. Father's name is a blank line someone drew through with a single stroke, very neat, very final. The left pocket has a photograph. Different from the first. Just one woman this time, young, maybe twenty, standing in front of a building with white columns. She's not looking at the camera. She's looking at something off to the left, out of frame, and her expression is complicated. Happy but also furious. Proud but also terrified. Someone caught mid-transformation. On the back: "The day I testified. They said I couldn't. Turns out 'couldn't' is negotiable." She sits in the folding chair because her legs have stopped being cooperative. Margaret Ruth Coleman. M.R.C. The initials carved under the table leaf. The woman in the middle of the first photograph, probably. The one who kept better records. The banker's box has a label: "FOR THE SEVENTEENTH CHAIR." Someone used a label maker. Very official. Inside are file folders, organized alphabetically but by first names, which seems deliberately chaotic. Agnes. Catherine. Dorothy. Frances. Helen. Each folder has the same contents: birth certificate, death certificate, one photograph, one handwritten page labeled "What They Said" and another labeled "What Actually Happened." She opens Dorothy's folder. The "What They Said" page reads: "Died in childbirth, 1951. Very tragic. We don't talk about it." The "What Actually Happened" page reads: "Died in a motel room in Reno, 1968, with \$4,000 in her purse and a bus ticket to Vancouver. The childbirth story was cheaper than explaining where she went." Helen's file. What They Said: "Moved to California. Remarried. Lost touch." What Actually Happened: "Arrested at a protest in Montgomery. Served six months. Family declared her dead rather than admit where she was." She closes the box. Opens it again. Counts the folders. Eight. Eight folders. Eight women subtracted from the story. Eight who got erased, rewritten, simplified into convenient explanations that didn't raise questions at holiday dinners. The dress is still hanging there, waiting. She looks at it. Looks at the box. Understands what's being asked. Put on the uniform. Carry the

records. Become the seventeenth chair, the one who writes it differently, who keeps the actual accounting when the agreed-upon version gets too tidy. She stands. Starts unbuttoning her funeral clothes. The dress slides on like it was tailored yesterday, which maybe it was, in whatever sense tailoring matters when the measurements were taken before you existed. The pockets settle against her hips, full of other people's truth. Her phone buzzes. Her mother: "Are you there yet?" She types back: "Yeah. I'm here. The dress fits." Three dots appear. Disappear. Appear again. "Good. Now check under the card table. There's something we couldn't write down.

Chapter

Eight

written by Dario Selo

One crouches. One does not wish to crouch, precisely, but the imperative arrives from beyond oneself, from the phone still glowing in one's hand, from the pockets heavy with other women's testimonies, from the simple fact that having come this far, retreat seems a form of cowardice one cannot afford. Under the table: a metal box. Fireproof, one suspects, given the weight and the rubber seal. The kind designed to survive what people cannot. No lock, which surprises. Just a latch one lifts with a thumb that is trembling slightly, though whether from fear or anticipation one cannot determine. Perhaps they are the same thing. Inside, a cassette tape. Clear plastic case, white label in that same unfamiliar handwriting. One's name again. Just that. No explanation, no date, no warning about what one is about to hear. One supposes warnings are redundant at this point. And beneath the tape, wrapped in tissue paper that disintegrates at one's touch: a photograph. This one recent, digital, printed on glossy paper. One recognizes it immediately. Last summer. The birthday party one's mother had insisted on throwing despite one's protestations that twenty-six was not a milestone requiring celebration. One is standing at the table, cutting cake, and one's mother is beside one, and the angle is such that their profiles mirror each other almost exactly. Chin. Nose. The way the mouth turns down slightly at the corners even when smiling. But someone has drawn

on this photograph. Careful pencil lines extending from one's mother to a woman standing in the background, barely visible, who one had assumed was a neighbor. And from that woman, lines to another figure in the doorway. And from her, backward through time one supposes, through iterations, through generations, until the lines reach the margin where someone has written in tiny script: "We keep happening." One sits on the concrete floor because the chair seems suddenly too formal for what one is understanding. The women in the files, the eight erased ones, they are not gone. They are distributed. Broken into genetic drift, into inherited gesture, into the particular way one's hand moves when one is thinking, which one has just now noticed is identical to how the woman in the middle photograph holds her pen, poised above paper, deciding what to write. One is not one. That is the thing they could not write down, the thing too large for file folders and banker's boxes. One is eight. Or one is a fraction of eight. Or eight are fractions of one. The mathematics of inheritance do not resolve cleanly into singular identity. The cassette tape sits in one's palm. One has not owned a cassette player in a decade. One's mother knows this. They all know this. Which means the storage of the information matters more than its retrieval, or means that retrieval will happen when it happens, through mechanisms not yet apparent. Or perhaps one is meant to simply hold it. To carry it in the dress pocket alongside the photograph, the birth certificate, the paper that explains Margaret Ruth Coleman stood in front of a building with white columns and testified about something they said she could not testify about. To become a repository rather than a reader. The phone buzzes again. "Did you find it?" One types with fingers that feel like they belong to someone else, which perhaps they do. "Yes. The tape. But I don't have a way to play it." The reply arrives instantly. "You're not supposed to. Not yet. Bring it home." Home. The word sits strangely. The house one left an hour ago, is that home? The storage unit where one's actual history is archived, is that home? The table with its seventeen chairs, sixteen agreed-upon stories and one dissent, is that home? One stands, gathering the box, the dress still on because taking it off seems

like refusing the commission. One locks the unit behind oneself. The orange padlock clicks. One wonders how many other women have stood here, key in hand, deciding whether to return or to run. The Honda starts. The gate opens. Route 9 stretches backward toward the house that may or may not be home. At mile marker forty-one, the woman in the yellow dress is gone. Or has moved. Or was never there. One does not slow down to investigate. One drives toward the three women who are waiting. Who already know what one will say when one arrives. Who have always known. The bracelet catches light. One's name, written by a stranger. One's face, inherited from eight women who got erased. One is the seventeenth chair. One will write it down differently. One is bringing the tape home.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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