

FAMILY



The Long Table Keeps Its Appointments

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Colin McAteer
Two	Cora Lindgren
Three	Dan Okafor
Four	Iris Beddoe
Five	Priya Nair
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Seven	Ruth Ann Keller
Eight	Olive Kassen

Chapter

One

written by Colin McAteer

The handwriting slants backward, as if the person who wrote it had been left-handed or foreign or very old. The cousin's name is Mariela, and she turns the envelope over twice before opening it. Outside, cars are already pulling up the gravel drive. People she hasn't seen in years. People she hoped never to see again. The envelope contains a single photograph, black and white, edges scalloped. Six women stand in a line in front of this same table, the long one, which means the photo was taken in this room. The table looks newer. The women wear dresses from different decades. One has a cloche hat. Another wears jeans and platform shoes. A third is in what might be a Victorian collar. They are not smiling. Behind them, visible through the window, the oak tree is smaller. Mariela sets the photo on the table and opens the drawer wider. There are other things: a button that says VOTE in red letters, a ticket stub from a movie theater that closed in 1987, a pair of reading glasses with one cracked lens, a child's drawing of a house with too many windows, a recipe card for something called Funeral Cake written in pencil, a set of keys on a brass ring, a dried flower she cannot name. Her mother comes in without knocking, already dressed in black, already composed. She sees Mariela at the table and stops. "You found it." Mariela holds up the photograph. "Who are they?" Her mother crosses the room and takes the photo. Studies it for longer than seems

necessary. Her finger hovers over one of the women, the one in the cloche hat, but does not touch the surface. "I don't know all of them," her mother says. "But some." "This one is Grandmother Iris. Before she married." She points to the woman in platform shoes. "This one might be your great-aunt Theodora, but I've never seen a picture of her at that age." "Why are they all standing together? They're from different times." Her mother places the photo back on the table, aligns it with the edge. "Your uncle will be here soon. We should go over the arrangements." "Mom." "Mariela." Her mother's voice has the quality of a door closing. "Today is not the day for questions." But Mariela is already reaching into the drawer again, pulling out the recipe card. The handwriting is different from the envelope, rounder, more careful. The ingredients are simple: flour, sugar, eggs, milk, vanilla. At the bottom, a note in the same hand: Serve at the long table. They will come. Her mother sees what she is holding and something shifts in her face. Not surprise. Recognition. "You made this," Mariela says. "For Dad's funeral." "My mother made it for hers. Her mother before that." "And?" Her mother takes the card, runs her thumb across the words. "And they came." "Who came?" The first car door slams outside. Voices carry through the window. Her mother tucks the recipe card into her purse and straightens her shoulders. She looks at Mariela with an expression that might be warning or might be apology. "Set the table for thirteen," her mother says. "Use the good plates. All of them." "There are only eleven of us now." Her mother is already walking toward the door, her heels clicking on the old floorboards. She pauses at the threshold, one hand on the frame. "Set it for thirteen." Mariela is left alone with the drawer still open, the photograph of the six women watching her from the surface of the table. In the picture, barely visible, she notices something she missed before: the reflection in the window behind them shows not six women but seven. The seventh is standing where Mariela stands now, looking at the camera, wearing what might be a black dress for a funeral.

Chapter

Two

written by Cora Lindgren

The wood grain under Mariela's fingertips is warm, almost feverish. She presses her palm flat against the table's surface and feels it pulse, the way a throat pulses when someone is trying not to cry. The finish is cracked in places, smooth as skin in others. She runs her thumb along a burn mark shaped like an iron, or a hand. The drawer smells like pepper and old paper and something else, something living. Mildew, maybe. Or breath. She lifts out the reading glasses and the cracked lens falls free, lands soundless on the floorboards. When she bends to pick it up, she sees them: dark spots on the wood beneath the table, each one the size and shape of a kneecap. Worn into the grain by years of someone kneeling there, or many someones, one after another. She stands too quickly. Her hip knocks the drawer and it slides shut with a wooden click that sounds like a tongue against teeth. The voices outside are getting louder. Car doors, gravel crunching, her aunt's laugh that always sounds like coughing. Mariela goes to the kitchen and starts pulling down plates. The good ones, kept on the highest shelf, wrapped in cloth that hasn't been washed in decades. The fabric comes away damp. She counts: eleven, twelve, thirteen. One plate has a hairline fracture running through its center. Another is spotted with something brown that might be rust or might be blood. She washes them anyway, feeling the hot water soften her hands, watching the suds swirl gray down the

drain. When she carries the stack back to the long table, someone has closed the drawer. The photograph is gone. In its place sits a cake, tall and golden, still steaming. Mariela didn't hear anyone come in. She sets down the plates and touches the cake's surface. Her finger comes away sticky, sweet. The heat of it makes her mouth water. She sets the table the way her grandmother taught her: forks on the left, knives facing in, the plates exactly one thumb's width from the table's edge. But there are only eleven chairs. She counts again. Eleven. Her mother said thirteen. Mariela drags two more from the corners of the room, their legs scraping lines in the floor that look like the lines in her mother's face when she said they will come. The front door opens. Footsteps in the hall. Her uncle's voice, too loud, asking where to put the flowers. Mariela stands at the head of the table, where her father sat, where his father sat, where someone is always sitting even when the room is empty. The chair is still warm. She can feel it from here, radiating heat like a body just risen, like someone has only just now stepped away. Through the window, the oak tree is moving though there is no wind. Its branches scrape the glass, a sound like fingernails, like writing. Mariela counts the settings again: thirteen plates, thirteen forks, thirteen knives all facing in like pointing fingers. The cake sits in the center, golden and waiting. Her cousin Daniel appears in the doorway, already loosening his tie. "Christ, it's hot in here," he says. "Why does it smell like something's baking?" Mariela looks at the cake, at the steam still rising from its surface, at the way the light catches on its glaze like on water, like on glass, like on the whites of watching eyes. She opens her mouth to answer but her throat is coated with something sweet and thick, something that tastes like vanilla and flour and the particular salt of her own pulse. "I don't know," she says. Daniel crosses to the table and reaches for the cake. His hand hovers over it, close enough that the heat must be uncomfortable. He doesn't pull away. "Are we expecting company?" he asks, counting the plates. "Yes," Mariela says, though she doesn't know why. The word comes out tasting like sugar, like something she's been fed.

Chapter

Three

written by Dan Okafor

The thing about Daniel is he always had a weak sense of boundaries. Even as a child he'd wander into rooms where conversations stopped, open drawers that weren't his, eat cake before it was served. Now he's lowering his hand toward the glaze and Mariela wants to stop him but her mouth won't move, still thick with that phantom sweetness. His finger breaks the surface. The cake doesn't dent like cake should. It gives with a resistance that reminds Mariela of pressing into risen dough, or a bruise, or the soft place on a baby's skull. Daniel pulls his hand back. There's no frosting on his fingertip. Just a small dark opening where he touched, perfectly round, almost like a mouth. "That's weird," he says, but he's already turning away, wiping his hand on his pants. "Where's Mom? She said she'd be here by noon." "She's dead, Daniel. That's why we're here." He blinks at her, tie hanging loose, face rearranging itself into an expression that might be grief or might be the performance of it. "Right. Yeah. God. I meant, where's your mom. Aunt Silvia." "She's greeting people." But she isn't. The voices from the front hall have gone quiet. Mariela can hear the house settling into itself, or something in the house settling into place. The floorboards ticking. Water running somewhere though no one turned on a tap. The oak tree scratching at the glass. Daniel pulls out a chair, one of the ones Mariela dragged from the corner. "Mind if I sit? I've been driving since four a.m." "Better not."

The words come out before Mariela can think about them. "Those two are for the extras." "The what?" She gestures at the thirteen settings, at the two chairs that don't match the others, that never lived permanently at this table. "Mom said thirteen." Daniel laughs, but it dies halfway out. "For who? There's barely eleven of us left, and that's counting Uncle Perry's new wife, and I don't think she counts." The hole in the cake is growing. Not quickly. Just steadily, the way shadows grow when you're not watching, the way silence grows in a house after someone stops breathing. It's the size of a quarter now, dark inside, and Mariela thinks she can see something moving in there. Something wet. "Maybe we should cover that," Daniel says. He's noticed too. "With what?" "I don't know. A cloth? Plastic wrap?" He's backing toward the doorway now, casual, as if he just remembered somewhere else he needs to be. "You know what, I'm going to go see if Aunt Silvia needs help. With the guests. The live ones." He's gone before Mariela can point out what he said. The live ones. As if there are other kinds here, other kinds expected. She moves closer to the cake. The opening is the size of a fist now, and there's definitely something inside, something folded in on itself the way cloth folds, or wings, or fingers. The steam has stopped rising but the cake is still warm. She can feel the heat of it on her face like breath, like standing too close to someone who's leaning in to tell you a secret. From the drawer, there's a sound. A small wooden sliding, as if it's opening itself, just an inch. Just enough. Mariela doesn't look. She knows what kind of day this is now. The kind where you don't look at things that move on their own. The kind where you set the table for thirteen and you don't ask why and you don't taste the cake before it's time, before they come, whoever they are, whatever they are. Her mother appears in the doorway. Not walking in. Just there, sudden, as if she'd been standing in that exact spot all along and only now decided to become visible. "You didn't cover it," her mother says, looking at the cake. "No one told me to." "I shouldn't have to tell you everything, Mariela." They stand on opposite sides of the table, the cake between them with its dark opening, its secret unfolding center. Her mother's

face has the same expression it had when she looked at the photograph. Recognition. Resignation. The face of someone who's been to this funeral before. "What's going to happen?" Mariela asks. Her mother picks up one of the knives, adjusts its angle so it points more precisely inward. "What always happens. We'll eat. We'll remember. We'll say goodbye." "To Grandmother?" "Among others." The oak tree scrapes again. Mariela counts the plates once more, but this time she counts the dark spots worn into the floorboards beneath the table, the kneecap-shaped prayers, and there are thirteen of those too.

Chapter

Four

written by Iris Beddoe

The plates are breathing. Not all of them. Just the one with the fracture, the hairline splitting it like a mouth that never learned to close. Mariela watches the crack widen, contract. A rhythm she recognizes from somewhere. From nights pressed against her father's chest, counting the spaces between his heartbeats. From the hospital room at the end. She sets down the last fork and it rings against porcelain, a sound that keeps going after it should stop. Her mother is arranging something on the sideboard. Napkins, folded into shapes Mariela doesn't recognize. Birds, maybe. Or hands. The kind of origami that looks simple until you try to unfold it, until you realize it doesn't open the way it closed. "The glasses," her mother says without turning. "What glasses?" "In the cabinet. The crystal ones. Thirteen." Mariela counts the plates again because counting is something to do with her hands, something to do besides reach into that drawer that keeps opening itself. Twelve. Thirteen. Twelve again. The numbers won't hold still. In the cake's center, the dark opening has teeth now. Or the suggestion of teeth. The idea of them. Tiny and white and perfect as baby pearls. She goes to the cabinet. The crystal is cloudy with age, wrapped in newspaper from 1987. The year of the ticket stub in the drawer. The year of something. She unwraps each glass and the paper comes away printed with headlines she doesn't read, can't read, the words sliding off the page like

water, like the time she tried to read her father's death certificate and the letters wouldn't stay in order. Behind her: footsteps that stop just outside the doorway. She turns but no one is there. Just the empty threshold and beyond it the hallway where Daniel's voice is saying something about traffic, about the drive, about anything except why they're here. When she turns back, someone has drunk from one of the glasses. It sits apart from the others, a thumbprint of moisture on its rim. The faintest trace of lipstick, a color no one wears anymore. A color from the photograph, from the woman in the cloche hat, from 1927 or 1932 or whenever mouths were that particular shade of gone. Mariela's hands are shaking but she sets the table anyway. Twelve glasses. Thirteen. She's lost count. The numbers are doing what they did before, what they always do in this house, in this room, at this table that's been long since before anyone thought to call it that. Her mother moves to the window. Touches the glass where the oak branch scratches. "They're gathering," she says. "Who?" "Look." But Mariela doesn't want to look. Doesn't want to see what's collecting under the oak tree, what shapes are folding themselves out of the afternoon light, what dresses from what decades are assembling themselves in the driveway. The cake's opening is large enough now to fit a hand inside. Or for a hand to emerge. The difference matters but Mariela can't remember why. "You should change," her mother says. "Into something black. Something they'll recognize." "I'm already wearing black." Her mother finally turns from the window. Studies Mariela the way she studied the photograph. That same careful cataloging. "Not that black," she says. "The one in your grandmother's closet. The one that fits everyone." Mariela wants to ask what she means but the words taste wrong in her mouth. Thick and sweet. Like cake batter. Like vanilla. Like the particular sugar of a recipe passed down through hands that are all the same hand, wearing different skin. She can hear them now. The gathering. Car doors that don't quite sound like car doors. Footsteps on gravel that might be footsteps or might be something remembering how to walk. Voices sorting themselves into pitches that match the photograph, the women,

the seven in the window's reflection. Her mother straightens a knife that was already straight. "When they come in," she says, "don't stare. Don't count them. Don't try to figure out who's who." "What do I do?" "Serve the cake." Her mother's hand rests on the table's surface, on the wood grain that pulses like fever, like grief. "One slice for each of them. But save the center." "For who?" "For last. For the one who's still deciding." The front door opens. Closes. Opens again. The sound of it like breathing, like the house inhaling guests it's been holding its breath for. Mariela grips the back of a chair, the one at the table's head, the one that's always warm. Under the table, in the dark space between floor and shadow, something is kneeling. Waiting its turn.

Chapter

Five

written by Priya Nair

The thing kneeling under the table has her grandmother's shoes. Mariela knows because she helped pick them out for the burial, the black pumps with the sensible heel, the ones Grandmother said made her feel like she was going somewhere even when she was standing still. They're spotless. No grave dirt. No coffin dust. Just polished leather and the soft creak of someone shifting weight from knee to knee like they're rehearsing how to stand. Mariela should move. Should back away. Should do any of the things people do when they realize the dead are keeping appointments. Instead she crouches down, fast, the way you'd check under a bed for monsters except this is the opposite of that, this is checking for monsters and finding your grandmother. It's not her grandmother. It's wearing her shoes, yes, but the legs ascending into shadow are wrong. Too many knees. Or knees in the wrong places. And the breathing, if that's what the sound is, comes in threes. Inhale, inhale, exhale. Like a waltz. Like a prayer with an extra syllable. "Mariela." Her mother's voice from across the room, sharp as the cake knife. "What did I tell you about looking?" "You said don't stare at them when they come in." "Under the table counts as in." Mariela stands too fast. Her head goes light. When she blinks, there are more people in the room. Four of them, five, arranged around the table like they've been there the whole time, like Mariela's the one who just arrived. The woman nearest her

wears the cloche hat from the photograph, but up close the hat is made of something that isn't felt, something that looks like felt the way a good liar looks like they're telling the truth. "Darling," the woman says, and her mouth moves but the voice comes from somewhere left of her face. "You've gotten so tall." Mariela has never seen this person before in her life. In her life being the operative phrase. "Aunt Theodora," her mother supplies, smooth as anything. "You remember Mariela." "Of course." Theodora's hand reaches out. Mariela takes it because that's what you do. The fingers are cool and pliant, like clay that's been worked recently, like something still deciding its final shape. "You have your father's eyes. Before they changed." "Before they, " "Mariela." Her mother again. "The cake." Right. The cake. With its dark center and its idea of teeth and the way it's stopped pretending to be just a cake. Mariela can see into the opening now, see that it goes down farther than the cake is tall, down into the table or through it, and at the bottom something is looking up. She picks up the knife. It's heavier than it should be, balanced wrong, like it's weighted for a different kind of cutting. Around the table, the guests are settling into chairs. Some of the chairs were empty a second ago. Some are still empty but occupied anyway, holding the shape of people in the way air holds shapes after you've walked through it. Daniel stumbles back in, tie completely off now, face red. "Aunt Silvia, there are people on the lawn who, I don't think they're, I mean I don't remember inviting, " He stops. Stares at the table. At the guests. At Theodora in her not-felt hat. "Oh." "Daniel." Theodora beams at him with teeth that are definitely teeth, no question about that, probably the most tooth-like teeth Mariela has ever seen. "Still afraid of confined spaces, I imagine?" Daniel opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again like a fish, like the hole in the cake, like all the openings in this room that lead somewhere else. "He'll sit there," Mariela's mother says, pointing to a chair. Not one of the extra two. "Next to his mother." "My mother's in the car. She's coming. She said she needed a minute." "She'll need more than that," says a woman in platform shoes, the one who might be young Grandmother Iris, who definitely is because Mariela can see it now, can

see her own face in this woman's face sixty years removed. "Parking takes time when you're driving against the grain." Mariela cuts into the cake. The knife goes in easy, like the cake wants to be cut, like it's been waiting. She slides the first piece onto a plate and the dark center yawns wider, adjusts itself. Makes room. Inside it now she can see what she thinks is a table. The long table. This table. Except it's underneath them, or they're above it, or time is doing what it does at funerals and making everything simultaneous. "That one's mine," Theodora says, and Mariela's hand is already moving the plate toward her, muscle memory from a dinner she never attended.

Chapter

Six

written by typewriter_tom

The plate slides across the table on its own. Mariela's hand isn't touching it anymore but it keeps going, stops exactly in front of Theodora with a soft click. Like something locking into place. Mariela cuts the next slice. The cake's insides are darker than they should be, wet-looking, and when the knife comes out there's no crumb on the blade. Just a smear of something clear. She puts the slice on a plate and Grandmother Iris reaches for it before Mariela can move. "Still warm," Iris says. She doesn't eat it. Just rests her fingers on top, pressing down until the cake compresses, springs back. "That's good. Cold cake means you've waited too long." "Too long for what?" Daniel asks. He's gripping the back of his designated chair but hasn't sat. "For them to set," says a third woman, the one in the Victorian collar. Mariela doesn't know this one. The collar is yellow with age and fastened with a cameo brooch that has a crack through the face. "Once they set, you can't do anything. They're fixed." Mariela cuts another slice. The hole in the center is bigger than the cake now. That shouldn't be possible but she stopped caring about possible when she saw her grandmother's shoes under the table, when she touched the plate that was breathing. She can see down into the opening clearly now. There is a table down there. This table. People sitting at it. One of them is looking up at her. It's her father. Not dead-father. Living-father. Father from maybe ten years ago, hair still

dark, wearing the blue shirt he always wore to family dinners because her mother said it brought out his eyes. He's looking up through the cake like looking through a window and his mouth is moving. Saying something. A word she can't hear. "Don't listen," her mother says. She's suddenly beside Mariela, hand on her wrist. "He's not talking to you yet." "Yet?" Her mother takes the knife from her hand. Cuts the next three slices herself, quick and efficient. The practiced motions of someone who's done this before. Who will do it again. She plates each slice and they drift to their designated seats, finding people Mariela didn't see arrive, people who might have been here the whole time, compressed into the spaces between seeing. Daniel finally sits. His chair scrapes and the sound it makes is wrong, backward, like a recording played in reverse. "How many are we waiting for?" he asks. "Two," says Theodora. "One," says Iris at the same time. They look at each other. Something passes between them. An argument conducted in silence, in the language of people who've had this fight before. "Two," Mariela's mother says, settling it. She's still cutting. The cake should be gone by now but there's always more. The knife goes in, comes out, goes in. "One is already here. One is deciding." The front door opens again. Footsteps in the hall. These ones sound normal, human, weighted with grief instead of whatever the others are weighted with. Mariela's Aunt Claire appears in the doorway. Living Aunt Claire. She's holding a casserole dish and crying. "I'm sorry I'm late," she says. "I couldn't find the, I didn't know, " She stops. Stares at the table. At the guests. At the cake that's mostly hole now, mostly absence. "Who are all these people?" No one answers. Claire sets down the casserole on the sideboard. Her hands are shaking. "Silvia? What's going on?" Mariela's mother places the knife on the table. Straightens. Smooths her black dress with both hands. "We're having the funeral, Claire. Like we discussed." "This isn't a funeral. This is, " Claire backs toward the door. "This is something else." "Sit down," Iris says. Not unkindly. "Your chair is there. Between Daniel and the empty one." "I don't want to sit." "You already are." And she is. Somehow Claire is in the chair, casserole forgotten, hands folded in her

lap like they've been there for hours. Like her body decided without asking. "Now we wait for the last one," Theodora says. Under the table, Grandmother's shoes shift again. The breathing in threes continues. Inhale, inhale, exhale. Mariela looks into the cake's center. Her father is still down there. Still looking up. Still mouthing that word. Run.

Chapter

Seven

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One does not run from a table at which one has already been seated. This principle, if nothing else, remains absolute in the conduct of family gatherings. Mariela understands this as she understands the arrangement of silverware, the proper angle of a knife, the manner in which certain doors, once opened, admit only forward passage. Her father's mouth shapes the word again. Run. But the instruction arrives too late, or too early, or from a version of him that has not yet learned what the women at this table already know: that departure is a courtesy extended only to those who have not yet been served. "The last slice," her mother says, "shall wait." She sets the knife beside the cake, blade aligned with the table's edge. Beneath the table, the breathing shifts rhythm. Inhale, exhale, inhale. A pattern adjusting itself to accommodate new arrivals, or the anticipation thereof. "I don't understand what we're waiting for," Claire says. Her voice emerges thin, stretched. "Mother's already buried. We saw them close the, we watched them, " "Hush," says the woman in the Victorian collar. She has not touched her cake. None of them have. The slices sit cooling, or warming, or doing whatever it is that cake does when it exists in conditional relation to time. "One doesn't speak of burial at the long table. It's in poor taste." Theodora dabs at her mouth with a napkin, though she has eaten nothing. "The living are always so literal about

death." "Were we not literal ourselves?" Iris asks. "I recall a great deal of screaming." "That was different. We didn't have the recipe then." Mariela's hands have found the photograph in her pocket. She does not remember taking it from the table, yet here it is, edges sharp against her palm. She draws it out. The six women, the table, the window's reflection showing seven. In the photograph, the seventh figure has moved. Now it stands closer to the camera, features nearly visible. Nearly, but not quite. The space between nearly and quite is where Mariela finds herself trapped. "Put that away," her mother says. "Who is the seventh?" "The one who takes the picture. Who else?" But Mariela can see the camera in the photograph now, resting on the table's far end. Set to a timer, perhaps, or operated by a hand that emerged just long enough to press the shutter. The mathematics of it refuse to resolve cleanly. Daniel makes a sound low in his throat. "I think I need air." "You need cake," Theodora tells him. "Eat." "I don't want, " "Eat." He lifts his fork. The motion possesses a quality of inevitability, as though his hand were merely completing an action it began years ago and is only now finishing. The fork descends. Pierces the slice. Rises to his mouth. He chews. Swallows. Sets down the fork with great care. "Well?" Iris leans forward. "It tastes like, " Daniel's face works through several expressions, settling on none of them. "It tastes like the morning Father took me fishing. The morning before he got sick. When he taught me to tie the, to tie, " He stops. Looks at his plate. At his hands. At the space between his hands where something he cannot name has just occurred. "That's how one knows it's ready," says the woman in the Victorian collar. The breathing beneath the table has stopped. The silence that replaces it is worse. It is the silence of something finished waiting, something prepared to stand. From the hallway comes the sound of footsteps. These are unlike the others. They arrive with weight and specificity, with the particular cadence of someone who has walked this floor a thousand times and knows exactly which boards creak, which corners catch the light. Mariela knows these steps. Knew them. Knows them still. The footsteps stop at the threshold. "There," her mother says

quietly. "Now we are thirteen." Mariela turns to look at the doorway, though one is not supposed to look, though one is meant to wait until they enter and settle themselves before acknowledging their presence. But she is still learning the etiquette of these gatherings, still young enough to make errors of form. Her grandmother stands in the doorway wearing the shoes from beneath the table. Wearing also the dress they buried her in, which no longer appears to have been underground at all. She is composed. Upright. Precisely as Mariela remembers her, save for the expression on her face, which suggests she has been rehearsing what to say and has just now forgotten the opening line. "Shall we begin?" Grandmother asks.

Chapter

Eight

written by Olive Kassen

Light comes through the oak tree in pieces. That is what Mariela notices instead of her grandmother's face, which she cannot bring herself to see all at once. The branches cast shadows that break apart on the floor, on the table, across the plates that have been waiting. Her grandmother moves into the room and the shadows move with her, or she moves through them, or the distinction no longer holds. "You've grown your hair," Grandmother says to Mariela. Not a question. An observation made from a distance greater than the space between them. "Last year," Mariela says, and her voice sounds like something borrowed. Grandmother takes the thirteenth chair. The one at the far end, opposite the head where Mariela's father used to sit, where the warmth still gathers. She settles into it the way water settles into a basin. Completely. Without question. Her mother rises. Picks up the cake knife. The blade catches light that isn't coming from the window. "The center portion," Iris says, "is hers." "I know the custom." Mariela's mother cuts into what remains. The hole has closed somewhat, or folded in on itself, leaving just enough cake for one slice. She lifts it with the server and it comes away clean. No dark interior now. Just cake. Golden and ordinary and still faintly steaming. She places it in front of Grandmother, who looks at it the way you'd look at a letter you've been expecting but hoped wouldn't come. "I didn't think I'd be hungry," Grandmother says. "One

is always hungry after," Theodora replies. "That's the whole point." Grandmother picks up her fork. The silverware makes a sound against the plate like a bell heard from far off, like the ones they rang at her funeral three days ago when they lowered the box into the ground. Mariela watched them do it. Watched the earth accept what they gave it. The earth is supposed to keep things. "Mariela made the cake," her mother says, which is a lie, which is the truth, which might be both depending on when you measure from. Grandmother takes a bite. Chews slowly. Her throat works as she swallows and Mariela watches because she needs to see it, needs to confirm that physics still applies to some things, that gravity pulls down even on the dead. "It's good," Grandmother says. She sets down her fork. Folds her hands on the table. "You always had the touch for it. Even when you were small." "I never made this before." Mariela's words come out hard. She wants them to be hard. "Not yet." Grandmother's smile is soft at the edges, worn. "But you will. That's how it works. The recipe moves backward as much as forward." Around the table, the others have begun eating. Daniel chews mechanically, eyes unfocused. Claire has her fork halfway to her mouth, holding it there. The woman in the Victorian collar eats with precise small bites, dabbing her lips between each one. Mariela looks down into the cake's center. Her father is gone from the opening. In his place she sees another table, another gathering. Women in dresses she doesn't recognize. A girl who might be her mother at nine or ten, watching someone cut a cake. "When do I leave?" Mariela asks. She doesn't know she's going to say it until the words are out. The table goes quiet. Forks pause. Even the breathing from beneath, which has started again, holds for a moment. Grandmother sets her napkin beside her plate. "That's not the question you want to ask." "Yes it is." "The question," Grandmother says, "is when do you come back." Outside, the oak tree scrapes the window. Once. Twice. Mariela counts without meaning to, the way she's been counting all day. Plates, chairs, women in a photograph, spaces between heartbeats. Her mother is standing at the sideboard now, pulling out the drawer. The one that keeps opening itself. She reaches in

and draws out an envelope. Brings it to Mariela. The handwriting on the front slants backward. The name written there is not Mariela's. It's her daughter's name. A daughter she doesn't have. Won't have for years. Will have already had, depending. "Set the table," her mother says quietly, "for thirteen." Mariela takes the envelope. The paper is warm, feverish, pulsing against her palm. "I don't understand." "You will," Grandmother says. She's standing now, though Mariela didn't see her rise. "We all do. Eventually." The room fills with light that comes from nowhere, from the table itself maybe, from the long history of hands that have touched this wood. Mariela closes her fingers around the envelope and feels the future press back.

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

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