

FAMILY



The Table Remembers Everything

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Sammy Hall
Two	Priya Nair
Three	Iris Beddoe
Four	Dan Okafor
Five	Ruth Ann Keller
Six	jmarsh
Seven	Sasha Loomis
Eight	Olive Kassen

Chapter

One

written by Sammy Hall

The thing about Grandma Ruth is she never wrote anything down. Not grocery lists, not birthday cards, nothing. Said her memory was better than paper and I guess she was right because she could tell you what happened on any given Tuesday in 1963 if you gave her a minute to think. So when I saw that envelope with "Cassie" written across it in this spidery cursive that looked like it belonged in a museum, I knew it wasn't from her. I should've opened it right away but Aunt Diane was coming up the stairs and she had that look she gets, like she was already mentally dividing up the silverware. Mom says Diane turned bitter after Uncle Frank left but I think she was always that way, just better at hiding it before. "What are you doing in here?" Diane asked, even though it was obvious I was standing at the table running my fingers along the groove some long-ago kid had carved into the edge. Probably my dad. He was always the one who got in trouble. "Just looking," I said, and slipped the envelope into my back pocket. The drawer was full of the kind of junk that accumulates when nobody wants to throw anything away but nobody knows what to keep either. Buttons that didn't match any clothing we owned. A religious medal with a saint I didn't recognize. Three skeleton keys that probably didn't open anything anymore. A photograph so faded you could barely make out the people in it, standing in front of some building that wasn't there now. Diane reached

past me and pulled out a ring, gold and thin as a thought. "This was Mother's," she said, which was a lie. Grandma Ruth wore the same ring for sixty years and it was still on her finger down at Morrison's Funeral Home. "That's nice," I said, because what else do you say when someone's actively rewriting history in front of you? She pocketed it and kept digging. Found a little book, pocket-sized, with dates from the 1940s. Someone's ration book from the war. She flipped through it like it was nothing and tossed it back in the drawer. "Garbage," she muttered. "All of it." After she left I took the ration book out again. The name inside was Thomas Brennan and I'd never heard of him. The stamps were mostly used but there were a few left, which seemed sad somehow. Like he'd saved them for an emergency that never came, or came too late. The envelope in my pocket felt warm. Stupid thought, I know. Paper doesn't generate heat. But it felt like it did. Downstairs people were arriving, that steady stream of relatives and neighbors who show up when someone dies, bringing casseroles and their own old stories. I could hear my mother doing her hostess voice, the one that's slightly higher than her regular voice. My dad was probably in the garage, hiding. I sat down at the table, same spot I'd sat at for every holiday dinner since I was old enough to not need a high chair. Someone had carved something else into my section, I noticed. Initials: M.B. + R.K. The letters were deeper than the groove, angrier somehow. Or maybe just more certain. The envelope was sealed with actual wax. An imprint of something in the red wax, a symbol I didn't recognize. Who does that? Who seals an envelope like they're a character in a novel? I picked at the edge of it. The wax crumbled a little, old and brittle. From downstairs, Aunt Diane's voice cut through the murmur: "Well, someone has to go through everything. That table's worth money, you know." I pressed my thumb into the wax seal and it split clean down the middle.

Chapter

Two

written by Priya Nair

Inside was a single photograph and a key taped to an index card. The photo showed the table, this table, but younger somehow. Shinier. It was outside, which seemed wrong because I'd only ever seen it in the dining room, and there were maybe twenty people gathered around it, all of them dressed like they were about to rob a train in a good way. 1920s, maybe. The women had those marcel waves and the men wore suspenders with an unironic confidence I had to respect. On the back, in that same spidery handwriting: "The first gathering. Before we knew." Before we knew what? I hate when dead people are cryptic. Just say the thing. The key was small, brass, with a square head and a shaft that looked too delicate to open anything important. The index card said: "Third floorboard from the left, under where the credenza used to be." What credenza? There had never been a credenza. I'd have remembered a credenza. I barely knew what a credenza was but I'd have remembered it. "Cassie?" My cousin Joel appeared in the doorway, holding a plate of those sandwich pinwheels that show up at every family gathering like they're mandated by law. "You okay? You look like you've seen something." Joel was the only cousin worth talking to. He'd dropped out of law school to become a potter and the family treated him like he'd joined a cult, but his bowls were actually pretty great. Lopsided in an intentional way. "Do you know who Thomas Brennan is?" I asked. He bit

into a pinwheel, considered. "Wasn't he Grandma's uncle? The one who disappeared?" "Disappeared where?" "I mean, if we knew that, he wouldn't have disappeared, would he?" He sat down across from me, same spot he'd taken at every dinner. "Why?" I showed him the ration book. He turned it over in his hands like it was one of his bowls, checking the weight of it. "Huh," he said. "You find anything else?" Before I could answer, there was a crash from downstairs. Not a glass breaking. Something heavier. Something wooden and final. We both ran. The table, our table, its twin or ancestor or whatever it was, lay on its side in the hallway. Aunt Diane stood over it, breathing hard, and Uncle Marcus had his hands up like he was trying to calm a spooked horse. "It was listing," Diane said. "I was just trying to see if the legs were loose." "By tipping it over?" Marcus had that dangerous quiet in his voice, the one that came out when he was really angry instead of just annoyed. Mom appeared from the kitchen, dish towel in hand. "For God's sake, Diane." But I was looking at the underside of the table. At the panel that had come loose in the fall, revealing a space underneath. A hollow about six inches deep, running the length of the table. And it wasn't empty. "Is that," Joel started. "Letters," I said. Dozens of them, maybe hundreds, tied in bundles with string that had gone brown with age. And underneath them, something else. Something wrapped in cloth that looked like it might have been white once. Diane bent down to grab one of the bundles but Mom caught her wrist. "Don't," Mom said. Not angry. Almost scared. "We need to, I don't know. We need to be careful." "Careful of what? They're just old letters." But the way Mom was looking at that cloth bundle, I knew she was thinking the same thing I was: nothing wrapped that carefully is ever just anything.

Chapter

Three

written by Iris Beddoe

The cloth smelled like pennies. Like the drawer where Grandma Ruth kept her sewing needles, the ones she never used after her hands went stiff. I knelt beside the overturned table. Mom still had Diane's wrist and Joel had gone statue-still, the way he did when he was really paying attention. My fingers on the fabric. Rough. Old cotton or maybe linen, the weave loose enough to catch on my thumbnail. "Cassie," Mom said. Just my name. Nothing after it. I unwrapped anyway. A knife. Small. Bone handle with scrimshaw so faded I couldn't make out what it had been. The blade was dark. Not rusted. Stained. "Jesus Christ," Diane whispered. She'd found religion somewhere between the upstairs drawer and this moment. The bundles of letters had dates on the string tags. I could see the closest one: September 1931 - December 1931. The ink had bled through in places, making the paper translucent. Someone had written a lot of somethings. Heavy-handed, urgent somethings. Joel reached past me and picked up the bundle marked June 1944. The string disintegrated when he touched it and letters spilled across the floorboards like teeth from a broken jaw. His hands were shaking, which I'd never seen before, not even when his kiln exploded and took his left eyebrow with it. He opened the top letter. Read for maybe ten seconds. Then sat back hard. "They knew," he said. "Knew what?" Diane had recovered enough to be annoying again. "About the table. About what

it." He stopped. Started over. "This one's from someone named Catherine. She says she tried to burn it. The table. Says she dragged it out to the field behind the house and doused it in kerosene and lit the match." We all looked at the table. Solid. Unburned. Taking up space like it had every right. "Obviously that didn't work," Diane said. "She says it wouldn't catch. The fire kept going out. And then." Joel's voice had gone thin. "She says Thomas came back." "Thomas Brennan?" I pulled out the ration book. "Disappeared Thomas?" "She doesn't say came back to life. She says came back." Joel picked up another letter. "This one's from 1947. Someone named Martin. He says the table was in his grandmother's house in Boston and when she died they shipped it to Kansas and it arrived three days before they sent it." "That's not possible," Mom said. But she'd let go of Diane's wrist. She was backing toward the kitchen. I looked at the key taped to the index card in my pocket. Then at the floorboards. "Where did the credenza used to be?" I asked. No one answered. But we all turned to look at the same empty stretch of floor. The space between the hall and the dining room where nothing had ever been, as far as I could remember, but the floorboards were slightly lighter there. A rectangle of less-faded wood. "I'll get the crowbar," Joel said. "No," Mom said. Then, quieter: "Not yet." Diane was reading one of the letters now. Her face had gone the color of skimmed milk. "What?" I said. She handed it to me. The handwriting was Grandma Ruth's. Which was impossible because Grandma Ruth never wrote anything down. Dated last month. They think I don't remember. They think because I'm old I've forgotten how it works. But you can't forget something that lives in your blood. The table chooses. It's choosing you, Cassie. I'm sorry. The envelope in my pocket. The seal I'd broken. My name in handwriting I'd never seen, except I had seen it, just now, in a letter that shouldn't exist. Outside, someone's car alarm started going off. Then another. Then all of them, up and down the street, a chorus of panic. The lights flickered. In the hollow under the table, something else moved.

Chapter

Four

written by Dan Okafor

The something turned out to be moths. Just moths, fat and pale, pouring out of the table's gut like it had finally coughed up whatever had been lodged in there. Disappointing, honestly. I'd been braced for something with more teeth. They scattered toward the ceiling and we all watched them go, embarrassed by our own fear. Except the fear didn't leave. It just redistributed itself, settled lower, became the kind you can't shake off by laughing. Diane brushed at her hair even though none of the moths had come near her. "Well," she said, aiming for brisk and landing somewhere near hysterical, "that's. That's just an infestation. We'll need to call someone." "An exterminator," Mom said flatly. "For a table that time-travels and resurrects the dead." "We don't know that it does any of that." But Diane was already halfway to the door. Joel gathered up the scattered letters, careful now, like they might bite. I watched his hands sort them by date, his potter's fingers automatically arranging chaos into order. He'd always been good at that. Making sense of things that didn't want to make sense. "1931," he said. "That's when it starts. The letters. Before that there's nothing." "Or nothing survived," I said. "Or nothing needed to be written down yet." He looked at me. "Your grandmother's letter. She said you can't forget something that lives in your blood." I didn't want to think about what that meant. About inheritance as something other than jewelry and furniture. About family

as a thing that ran deeper than just showing up to the same table every Thanksgiving. The key was still in my pocket. I pulled it out, held it up to the light. Tarnished but solid. Real in a way the letters weren't quite, in a way that made me trust it less. "Third floorboard from the left," I said. "Under where the credenza used to be." Mom made a sound. Not quite a word. When I looked at her she was staring at the lighter rectangle of floor and her face had gone somewhere else. Somewhere with a credenza, maybe. Somewhere before I was born. "There was a credenza," she said finally. "When I was little. Your grandmother got rid of it when your dad and I got married. Said it didn't fit anymore." "Didn't fit where?" "Just didn't fit." She wiped her hands on the dish towel even though they weren't wet. "She made your grandfather take it to the dump. He said it was solid walnut, worth something, but she insisted. I remember because he didn't speak to her for a week and that never happened. They didn't fight." Joel was already counting floorboards from the left side of the lighter rectangle. He stopped at three, pressed down. The board gave a little, the kind of give that meant it had been lifted before. Replaced. Made to look fixed. "We could not do this," he offered. But he was already working his fingers under the edge. The board came up easier than it should have. Underneath: another space. Smaller than the one in the table. More deliberate. Someone had lined it with tin, carefully folded and soldered at the corners. A box without a lid. Inside the box: a stack of photographs, face down. A ring that looked like the one Diane had pocketed but wasn't. And a birth certificate. Joel lifted out the birth certificate. The paper was brittle but the ink was clear. I read over his shoulder. A girl born in 1930. Name: Margaret Ruth Brennan. Mother: Catherine Brennan. Father: Thomas Brennan. "Margaret Ruth," Mom said. Her voice had gone somewhere small. "That was Grandma's name. Before she was Ruth. She was Margaret Ruth but she only ever went by Ruth." "Thomas Brennan," I said. "The disappeared uncle." "Not uncle," Joel said. He'd turned over the top photograph. It showed a young woman holding a baby, standing next to a man who looked afraid of the camera. Behind them: the table,

inside now, in a dining room I didn't recognize. "Father." The car alarms outside had stopped. The house was too quiet. The kind of quiet that meant everyone had gone somewhere else, fled to their cars or the yard or anywhere that wasn't here. I picked up the ring. It was warm. Actually warm, not imaginary warm. And on the inside was an inscription so small I had to squint: M.B. + R.K. The initials carved into the table upstairs. "What did Grandma Ruth's husband's name?" I asked. Mom's face. "Richard. Richard Keller." The lights went out.

Chapter

Five

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One ought not to place undue significance upon the failures of municipal services. Electrical disruptions occurred with some regularity in that neighborhood, particularly when the weather turned inclement, which it had been threatening to do since morning. Nevertheless, one felt compelled to acknowledge that the timing demonstrated a certain theatrical precision that seemed, if not intelligent, then at least purposeful in a manner that defied comfortable explanation. The darkness was absolute for perhaps three seconds. Then Joel produced his mobile telephone and illuminated the space with that peculiar blue light which modern devices emit, casting our faces into a theatrical arrangement of shadow and prominence that called to mind certain paintings of the Dutch masters. One has always maintained that artificial light does disservice to the human countenance, but in this instance the distortion seemed appropriate. "The ring," Mother said. Her voice had acquired a quality one had not heard since childhood, when she would read aloud from books of ghost stories and attempt to frighten us into an early bedtime. "Put it back." One found oneself disinclined to obey. The metal against one's palm had grown warmer still, and with the heat came a sensation not unlike recognition. As though the object knew the hand that held it. As though it had been waiting. Joel had begun to examine the photographs more closely. He

lifted each one with the edge of his sleeve, unwilling to touch them directly. One could observe his expression shifting as he progressed through the stack, moving from curiosity to confusion to something that resembled, if one were to name it plainly, distress. "They're all the same," he said presently. "The same photograph?" "The same people. But the dates on the back." He arranged three of them in a row upon the floor. "This one says 1932. This one 1945. This one 1958. But look at them. Catherine and Thomas. They haven't aged a day." One moved to examine them oneself. He spoke accurately. The woman's face in each image bore the identical arrangement of features, the identical expression of carefully maintained composure. The man beside her demonstrated the same quality of nervous anticipation, as though he were perpetually on the verge of departing and could not quite commit to remaining. "And the table," Joel added. "It's in every single one." This too proved correct. The table appeared in each photograph, sometimes in the background, sometimes prominently featured, but always present. Always watching, if one could attribute such capacity to furniture, which surely one could not. And yet. The birth certificate rested upon the floor where Joel had placed it. One retrieved it, held it closer to the light. The paper possessed a texture one recognized from one's own work in the historical society, that particular weight and weave which had been common to official documents in that period. No forgery, then, unless executed by someone with access to authentic materials and considerable expertise. Margaret Ruth Brennan, born October 13, 1930. One calculated quickly. That would have made Grandmother Ruth ninety-four at the time of her death last week, which aligned correctly with what one had been told. Yet one distinctly recalled being informed she was eighty-nine. The obituary had stated as much. One had read it oneself, had indeed assisted in its composition. "Someone has been maintaining a careful fiction," one observed. "More than one someone." Joel indicated the letters, which he had succeeded in organizing by date. "There's correspondence here spanning from 1931 to six weeks ago. Multiple handwritings. Multiple authors. All of them

discussing the table. All of them trying to determine what to do about it." Mother had not moved. She remained fixed in place, regarding the space where the credenza had stood with an expression one could not adequately interpret. Finally she spoke. "My mother told me once that there were rules. I was seven, perhaps eight. She said there were rules about the table and I must never break them. I asked what rules. She said I would know when I needed to know." She paused. "I thought she was being fanciful. She did that sometimes, told stories. Made things mysterious that weren't." "And now?" one asked. "Now I think she was being precise." The ring had begun to emit a faint vibration. So subtle one might have dismissed it as imagination, as the trembling of one's own hand. But Joel had noticed as well, one could observe it in the manner his gaze had fixed upon the object. "There's one more photograph," he said. He held it toward the light. The image showed a much younger Mother, perhaps twenty years of age, seated at the table. Beside her sat Father.

Chapter

Six

written by jmarsh

The architecture of one's understanding began to collapse in upon itself. Father had been seated at this table, in this photograph, a full decade before Mother claimed to have met him at the university library in the autumn of 1979. One knew the story with the precision one knows all family mythology: the borrowed book, the coffee spill, the apology that became conversation that became courtship. Mother had recounted it at every anniversary dinner, each telling polished smooth with repetition. Joel rotated the photograph so that Mother might view it more clearly. She reached for it, then withdrew her hand as though the paper itself might burn. The date inscribed upon the reverse read March 1969. Mother would have been nineteen. Father, by his appearance, perhaps twenty-two. "That isn't possible," Mother said, though her voice carried no conviction. The statement arrived stillborn, a thing said because one must say something when confronted with evidence that rewrites the chronology of one's own existence. One examined Father's expression in the photograph with increasing unease. He wore the same wary tension visible in Thomas Brennan's face, that quality of a man who has stumbled into something larger than himself and not yet determined whether escape remains possible. His hand rested upon the table's surface. Not casually. Deliberately. As though making contact with something that required acknowledgment. "The ring is vibrating faster."

One spoke the observation aloud, though it seemed evident enough. The metal had begun to hum against one's palm with a frequency one could feel in one's teeth. Mother inhaled sharply. "Put it down, Cassie." But one's fingers had closed around it with an autonomy that suggested the decision belonged to someone else entirely. The heat intensified. Not painfully. Insistently. And with it came the distinct impression that one was being observed. Not by Joel or Mother, both of whom were watching with manifest alarm, but by something older. Something that resided not in the room but in the table itself, in the wood grain and the accumulated years and the hollow spaces where secrets accumulated like sediment. "I need to understand what this means." One spoke with a calmness one did not feel. "Grandmother left me the envelope. She said the table chooses. She apologized. Why would she apologize unless she knew what was coming?" Joel had retrieved another letter from the stack. His hands moved with the careful precision he employed when handling unfired clay. "This one's from Richard Keller. Your grandfather. Dated 1972. He says, 'I thought marriage would break the connection. Catherine believed the same when she married Thomas. We were both wrong. The table doesn't release bloodlines, it accumulates them.'" The implications arranged themselves with terrible logic. Father in the photograph before he should have been. Grandmother who was actually Margaret, daughter of Thomas who disappeared. Thomas who came back, according to Catherine's letter. The table that wouldn't burn. The credenza removed and hidden, the floorboards concealing what someone had desperately needed to preserve or contain. "Mother," one said. "Where is Father now?" The question fell into silence. Mother's face had assumed the particular blankness that arrives when one must choose between speaking truth and maintaining fiction, and the cost of either choice has grown too large to calculate quickly. "Your father is at the funeral home," she said finally. "Making arrangements." "Is he." It was not a question. One watched her face and understood with sick certainty that this too was story, careful fabrication, protection disguised as fact. The ring's vibration ceased abruptly. The sudden

stillness felt more alarming than the movement. In the tin-lined space beneath the floorboards, something caught the light from Joel's phone. Something that had been concealed beneath the photographs and documents, pressed against the metal bottom. One knelt, reached past Joel's shoulder, extracted it with two fingers. A key. Identical to the one taped to the index card, down to the delicate brass shaft and square head. But this one had a tag attached with wire, and written on the tag in Grandmother Ruth's hand: For the drawer that locked itself. When she's ready. One had examined the table drawer upstairs with considerable attention. It had possessed no lock. No keyhole whatsoever. Yet even as one formed this thought, one heard a sound from the floor above. Distinct. Unmistakable. The sharp click of a mechanism engaging. Of something that had been open sealing itself closed.

Chapter

Seven

written by Sasha Loomis

The moths had collected on the ceiling in a shape I recognized from somewhere. Not a pattern. A word. But when I tried to read it the letters scattered into wings again and the meaning went with them. Joel was already moving toward the stairs. "Wait," I said, but my mouth was full of copper taste, like I'd been chewing on the ring instead of holding it. I hadn't put it in my mouth. I was sure of that. Pretty sure. Mom's hand found my shoulder. "The drawer doesn't lock from the outside." "Then how did it lock?" She didn't answer. The question hung between us like laundry on a line, waiting for wind. I went up first because the envelope had my name on it and that seemed to establish some kind of priority, though priority over what I couldn't say. The stairs creaked in a sequence I knew by heart: three, seven, nine, twelve. But today there was an extra creak between nine and twelve. A step that shouldn't exist but did. The family room looked wrong. Same furniture, same curtains with the faded roses, same water stain on the ceiling shaped like Vermont. But the light came from the wrong direction. The window faced east. It had always faced east. The afternoon sun shouldn't be pouring through it at this angle, gold and thick as honey. Joel touched the table. Pulled back. "It's hot." "Furniture doesn't generate heat," I said, which was what I'd thought about the envelope but apparently I was developing a poor track record with temperature-based assumptions. The drawer sat

closed tight. I could see the keyhole now, brass and bright, as though it had just been installed by someone who valued craftsmanship. The wood around it bore no screw marks, no indication of recent addition. It had been there the whole time, I understood, just waiting to become visible. Mom stayed in the doorway. "My mother told me the drawer showed different things to different people. That you couldn't predict what you'd find. That sometimes you'd open it and the contents would be from a future that hadn't happened yet." "That's not how time works," Joel said. "Isn't it?" I fitted the first key into the lock. Wrong one. The metal rejected it, actually pushed back against my hand. I tried the second key, the one from the tin box, the one with Grandmother Ruth's tag. It slid in smooth. "Cassie," Mom said, just my name again, a word that meant stop and also please and also I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I turned the key. The drawer opened maybe an inch before something inside started screaming. Not a person. Not an animal. A sound that came from the place where wood remembers being tree and objects remember the hands that made them. Joel stumbled backward. Mom made a noise I'd never heard her make, something between grief and recognition. I pulled the drawer open the rest of the way. Inside: a birth certificate. Mine. Except the date was wrong, off by three years, and the father's name wasn't Richard Keller. It was Thomas Brennan. Beneath it, a photograph of me sitting at this table with people I'd never met, all of us dressed for some holiday I didn't remember attending. I was maybe twelve in the picture. The girl next to me looked exactly like the Catherine from the downstairs photographs, except she was wearing a Nirvana shirt and the calendar on the wall behind us said 2003. "This is Photoshop," I said. "Someone's messing with us." But my hand in the photograph wore the ring. The one currently burning against my palm. And the initials carved into the table's edge were fresh, the wood pale and exposed. M.B. + R.K. My initials. Except my middle name was Jane, not whatever started with B. Joel picked up a third item from the drawer. An envelope, sealed with red wax. He held it toward the light. "This one has my name on it." Mom was crying now, quiet

tears that suggested she'd been expecting this. That she'd known all along. "It's not Photoshop. It's memory. The table's memory. It keeps everything that happened at it. Everything that will happen." "That's impossible." "So was a credenza," she said. Outside, a car pulled into the driveway. I knew the sound of that engine. Dad's truck. Except Dad was supposed to be at the funeral home. Except maybe he wasn't. Maybe he'd never left. Maybe he'd been upstairs this whole time, waiting for the drawer to unlock itself. Waiting for me to be ready. The front door opened. Footsteps in the hall, familiar and wrong. "Cassie?" Dad's voice. "We need to talk about your grandfather.

Chapter

Eight

written by Olive Kassen

The air turned silver. Not metaphorically. I mean the light lost its color and thickness settled into the room like November fog, and through it Dad climbed the stairs with his work boots still on, which Mom never allowed. He tracked in pale dust. Not dirt. Something finer, older. Ash from a fire that hadn't burned yet or had burned so long ago the smoke had fossilized. His face looked flattened. A sketch of himself, details left unfinished. When he reached the doorway he stopped at the threshold like he needed permission, like this room had rules about entry that applied even to him. Especially to him. "Thomas isn't your grandfather," he said. "He's mine." The words hung in that silver air. Joel's phone light flickered and went dark. We stood in whatever remained of afternoon, which looked increasingly like something else. Like morning, maybe, or evening, or a time that existed only here, in this room, at this table that wouldn't burn. Mom moved to Dad's side. Their hands found each other automatically. Married forty-three years and still reaching blindly, still connecting in the dark. But she wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the drawer, at the photograph where I sat with Catherine in her Nirvana shirt. "Tell her," Mom said. Dad came into the room. Three steps. The floorboards held steady but I felt them consider shifting, felt the house adjust itself around his weight like it was making space it hadn't needed to make before. He stood across the table from me. His

hands pressed flat against the surface. "My father was Richard Keller," he said. "On paper. Legally. But blood doesn't care about paperwork. Thomas Brennan was my biological father. Is, maybe. The table makes tense complicated." He breathed slowly, the way you do when you're trying not to vomit. "He came back in 1957. That's what my mother, your grandmother Catherine, told me before she died. Said he walked in through the front door like he'd only been gone a few minutes, but he'd been missing sixteen years. Said he looked exactly the same. Young. Untouched." "Where had he been?" "Here." Dad's palm slapped the table. The sound bounced wrong, echoed upward instead of out. "In the wood. In the drawer. In whatever space opens up when the table decides it needs something from you." Joel had gone still beside me. His breathing barely moved. The potter's trick of holding yourself motionless so the wheel doesn't wobble, so the clay stays centered. "Catherine tried to turn him away," Dad continued. "But he said the table had given him a choice. Stay gone permanently or come back for exactly one night. One chance to set something right. She let him in. They, I mean." He stopped. His jaw worked. "I was born nine months later." The birth certificate in the drawer made sudden, sick sense. Thomas Brennan named as father because that's what the table remembered, what it insisted was true despite everything the legal world said otherwise. "Ruth knew," Mom said quietly. "That's why she raised you as hers after Catherine died. Why she married Richard even though he knew. Even though everyone knew. She was trying to keep the bloodline contained at one table, in one family. Thought if she could control the gathering, she could control what the table took." I looked at the ring burning my palm. M.B. + R.K. Not my initials. Margaret Brennan and Richard Keller. Grandmother and grandfather. The original binding, the first attempt to lock the pattern down. But patterns don't lock. They repeat. They iterate. They find new flesh. "The table's choosing you," Dad said, and his voice carried something like mourning. "Same way it chose my mother. Same way it chose me, except I was born to it, didn't have a choice. You do. You can walk away now. Leave the drawer open,

leave the house. The bloodline ends with me. I made sure of it. Made sure you were born wrong for it, born sideways to the pattern." "Except I wasn't." I held up the photograph. "This hasn't happened yet. But it will." Outside, the sun finished whatever impossible arc it had been traveling. Full dark arrived in an instant. And in that darkness, I heard them gathering. Footsteps on the porch, in the driveway, crossing the lawn. All the ones who'd sat here before. All the ones who'd left something in the drawer. Coming home for the last supper.

Finished on 27 April 2026.

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

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