

MAGIC

HOW TO COUNT THE SILENCES

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE	wordsbylena
TWO	Dan Okafor
THREE	Iris Beddoe
FOUR	jmarsh
FIVE	typewriter_tom
SIX	Ruth Ann Keller
SEVEN	Sammy Hall
EIGHT	Priya Nair

Chapter

ONE

written by wordsbylena

The inventory began at 3:47 a.m. This was not my chosen hour. The hour chose itself when the first book fell from Shelf 14, Section C, Position 7. I counted the seconds until impact: four. I counted the pages that splayed open upon landing: 193 and 194. I counted the words visible on those pages: 847. I did not count the books before that night. This is important. I worked in the Gershwin Municipal Library for six years, two months, and eleven days without counting a single volume. I shelved them. I catalogued them. I stamped their due dates with the red ink stamp that required exactly 3.2 pounds of pressure to produce a legible impression. But I did not count them. The second book fell at 3:51 a.m. Shelf 14, Section C, Position 12. Five positions away from the first. The interval: four minutes. I began a list: Book One, 847 words visible. Book Two, 1,203 words visible. Difference: 356. The third book fell at 3:55 a.m., Position 17. The pattern declared itself. Every four minutes. Every five positions. I calculated the remaining books in Section C: forty-three. I calculated the time until the last would fall: two hours, fifty-two minutes. I calculated my willingness to leave before witnessing the completion: zero. By 4:23 a.m., I had collected twelve fallen books. I arranged them on the returns cart in the order of their falling. Their spines formed a sequence. The colors: red, red, blue, red, blue, blue, red, blue, red, red, red, blue. I counted the reds: seven. I counted the blues:

five. I counted the ratio: 1.4 to one, which reduced to seven-fifths, which was not a number that appeared anywhere in the Dewey Decimal System. At 5:11 a.m., the twenty-first book fell, and I noticed its pages were blank. Not blank as in unprinted. Blank as in the words had been subtracted. I could see the impressions where letters had pressed into the paper, valleys of absent ink forming ghost sentences. I counted the indentations on one page: 2,891. I did not count them all. I estimated. Estimation is controlled counting. It is counting that knows its limits. The lights in the library had been automatic for three years, four months, and sixteen days. They responded to motion sensors installed after the budget meeting on February 3rd. I knew this because I attended all budget meetings. I took minutes. I counted votes. The lights required movement every seven minutes or they would interpret the space as empty and shut themselves off. I had been standing still, watching books fall, for one hour and twenty-four minutes. The lights remained on. I began moving between fallen books, checking the pages, counting the ghost words. Book twenty-three: 4,107 impressions. Book twenty-four: 6,891 impressions. Book twenty-five: 11,998 impressions. The numbers were increasing but not arithmetically. Not geometrically. I tested Fibonacci: 4,107 plus 6,891 equals 10,998. The next book should show 10,998 impressions. Book twenty-six showed 11,998. A difference of 1,000 exactly. Someone had added 1,000 to the sequence. Someone was counting differently than the books wanted to be counted. At 6:39 a.m., the final book fell. I had predicted 6:39 a.m. I was correct within zero seconds. The book landed closed. It did not splay. It did not reveal its pages. It landed spine-up, title visible: "The Librarian's Rule (No. 6)." There was no author listed. There was no call number. There was no barcode. There was only the title and one additional detail I had not counted on: the book was warm. Not room temperature. Not sun-warmed. Body temperature. Ninety-eight point six degrees, though I did not have a thermometer to confirm this. I knew it the way I knew my own pulse: fifty-eight beats per minute, resting, which at that

moment was not resting at all. I opened the book to page one. It contained one sentence, repeated 1,000 times: "Count what remains."

Chapter

TWO

written by Dan Okafor

The sentence didn't end with a period. I noted this at 6:41 a.m., two minutes after the final book's landing. The absence of punctuation suggested continuation, which suggested incompleteness, which suggested I was meant to do something other than observe. I dislike being meant to do things. Intent implies intention implies an intender, and I had structured my life to minimize contact with intenders. I turned to page two. The sentence appeared 999 times. Page three: 998 times. I flipped ahead, sampling pages at intervals. Page fifty-seven: 944 repetitions. Page 203: 798. The countdown was precise, which meant page 1,000 would contain the sentence exactly once, probably with the punctuation I'd been promised. I did not flip to page 1,000. This was discipline, not curiosity. The books had fallen in sequence. The pages had revealed themselves in order. To skip ahead would be to count incorrectly, and counting incorrectly is worse than not counting at all. The warmth had faded from the cover. I checked: ninety-two degrees, approximately. Cooling at a rate consistent with a body no longer producing heat. A dead body, if books could die, though these books seemed more alive than most patrons I'd encountered. I looked up at Shelf 14, Section C. The empty positions formed a gap like missing teeth. Forty-three books removed from circulation, and no record of their checkout. The database would show them present. The physical world

disagreed. I've always trusted the physical world more than databases, which is possibly why I've never advanced beyond associate librarian. Mrs. Gershwinn arrived at 7:15 a.m., fourteen minutes early. She's been fourteen minutes early every morning for nine years, three months, and two days. She hung her coat on hook number three, placed her purse in drawer B-7, and walked directly to my desk without acknowledging the cart of fallen books. "You're still here," she said. "My shift ended at seven," I said. "It's 7:15." "Yes." She looked at the book in my hands. Her expression didn't change, but her breathing did. Sixteen breaths per minute normally. Now twenty-two. "You opened it," she said. "It fell," I said. "They all fell." "But you opened that one." I waited. She seemed to expect confirmation of something she'd already observed. "Rule Six," she said, and I realized she wasn't looking at the title. She was looking at me, counting something I couldn't see. "Did you read past page one?" "Page three," I said. "The numbers are decreasing by one." "Of course they are." She pulled her reading glasses from her cardigan pocket, unfolded them with the small click they always made, and reached for the book. I didn't hand it to her. Her hand remained extended between us, steady despite her elevated breathing. "The lights stayed on," I said. "I know." "There was no motion for eighty-four minutes." "The lights stay on when the library is counting," she said. "Now give me the book." "What is the library counting?" Her hand dropped. She counted something silently, lips moving through numbers I couldn't hear. When she reached whatever total she'd been seeking, she looked at the cart, at the forty-three books arranged in falling order, at their ghost-word pages. "Not what," she said. "Who. It's counting you." She walked to her office and closed the door with the particular firmness that meant do not follow. I looked down at the warm book cooling in my hands. Page four would have 997 repetitions. Page five, 996. I had 996 pages remaining before I reached the sentence that would be spoken only once. I began reading at 7:18 a.m. I did not stop to consider whether this was what the library wanted. Wanting and counting are different verbs entirely.

Chapter

THREE

written by Iris Beddoe

The words began changing at page forty-seven. Not the sentence. The spaces between. I noticed because I count everything, including the gaps where meaning isn't. On page forty-six, the sentence "Count what remains" consumed eleven characters plus two spaces between words. Standard. Predictable. On page forty-seven, repetition 954, the space between "what" and "remains" had widened by three millimeters. I measured with the metal ruler I keep in my desk drawer. The ruler is twelve inches long. I have used it to measure 3,847 objects since I began working here. This was measurement 3,848. By page fifty-one, the space had grown to seven millimeters. By page fifty-nine, to two centimeters. The words were drifting apart like continents, and between them, in the growing whiteness, other words were surfacing. Faint at first. Impressions, like the ghost text in the fallen books. But these weren't subtractions. These were additions trying to become solid. On page sixty-three, repetition 938, I could read the first emergent word: BETWEEN. On page sixty-seven: BETWEEN THE COUNTING. On page seventy-one: BETWEEN THE COUNTING AND THE COUNTED. Mrs. Gershwin had not emerged from her office. I checked the time: 8:47 a.m. She had been inside for ninety minutes. In nine years, three months, and two days, she had never remained in her office longer than forty-three minutes. Morning routine: coat, purse, desk check, patron greeting prep.

Always forty-three minutes. No variation. I stood. Walked to her door. Pressed my ear against the wood grain. Counting. She was counting inside, voice low and constant, numbers climbing toward something I couldn't locate. I heard her reach 4,107. Then 6,891. Then 11,998. The same numbers from the ghost impressions. She wasn't just counting. She was remembering the books' empty spaces, giving them sound. When she hit 19,997, the lights flickered. When she reached 24,003, they went out completely. I stood in darkness, my hand still on her door, and felt the book in my other hand grow warm again. Not body temperature. Hotter. Fever heat. The heat of something infected or becoming. The lights returned at 8:52 a.m., five minutes of darkness exactly. Mrs. Gershwin had stopped counting. I heard her chair scrape. Her footsteps approaching the door. I stepped back as she opened it. She looked past me to the book. "How far?" she asked. "Page seventy-one." "The words between?" I nodded. She closed her eyes. Counted something behind her lids. "Then you've seen it. The between-text." "What is it between?" "The first count and the second count." She opened her eyes. "The library counts its books. The books count their pages. The pages count their words. But between each counting, there's a gap where nothing is numbered. That's where things hide. Uncounted things." "Things?" "Patron requests no one made. Books no one shelved. Questions no one asked." She looked at the cart of fallen volumes. "Librarians no one hired." The book pulsed heat against my palm. I looked down. Page seventy-one was now blank except for three words centered in the white space: YOU ARE BETWEEN. Mrs. Gershwin touched my shoulder. Once. A counted gesture. "Rule Six," she said. "Count what remains. But don't count yourself." She returned to her office. The door stayed open this time. An invitation I didn't know how to measure. I turned to page seventy-two.

Chapter

FOUR

written by jmarsh

The page resisted turning, its edge thick as though swollen with moisture, though the air in the Gershwin Municipal Library maintained a constant forty-two percent humidity, had done so since the climate control system's installation on November 8th, six years prior. I applied pressure. The paper peeled away from its binding with a sound like skin separating from a blister. Page seventy-two bore 929 repetitions of the original sentence. But the spaces had become architecture. Where "Count" and "what" had once sat adjacent, now a chasm opened, white and deep as a stairwell descending into the page's fiber. I tilted the book. The space had dimension. Not printed depth, not an illusion of perspective. Actual recession, as though the paper had been excavated from within. Mrs. Gershwin was singing in her office. Not singing. Counting melodically, numbers given the cadence of hymn. 47, 51, 59, 63, 67, 71. The pages I had read. She was cataloging my progress through sound. I looked into the chasm between words. At its bottom, something moved. The movement was not shadow. Shadows require light and obstacle. This was the color of neither, a hue that existed in the vocabulary of no spectrum I had learned. It writhed with the motion of a thing that had forgotten how to be still because stillness would require acknowledgment of form, and form would require counting, and this thing was the opposite of counted. I have touched 12,847 books in my

tenure here. I have felt leather bindings gone soft with age, cloth covers stiff with disuse, paperbacks whose spines cracked like kindling. I had never felt a book breathe. Page seventy-two inhaled. The chasm widened. The thing at its bottom began climbing, not toward me but toward reality, pulling itself into existence through the infrastructure of spacing. It had too many edges. Corners that turned inward. Surfaces that faced directions I could not name, though I tried. North, south, east, west, up, down, and then the orientations failed. The thing existed in the prepositions no language had built grammar for. Mrs. Gershwin stopped counting. The silence was immediate and wrong, a caesura in the library's pulse. I heard her chair. Her door. Her footsteps stopping three feet, seven inches behind my left shoulder. I knew the distance without measuring. Proximity is a form of counting. "You looked in," she said. "Yes." "At the uncounted thing." "Yes." "You shouldn't have. Looking is a kind of counting, and counting is what gives them shape." The thing on page seventy-two had developed what might have been a limb or might have been a question mark grown solid. It reached toward the surface of the paper, touched the underside. The page bulged upward. A fingertip, possibly. A beak, perhaps. An appendage whose name lived in the gap between those guesses. "What happens when it reaches the top?" I asked. Mrs. Gershwin walked to the cart of fallen books. Selected the third one, the first that had landed closed. She opened it to a middle page. Held it toward me. The pages were not blank. They were occupied by something that had broken through, something that had been counted into being and then consumed the counting that made it. The impression it left was a hole with teeth marks. "The library has had six head librarians," she said. "I'm the fifth. Rule Six was written by the first. She understood that counting is conjuration. To number a thing is to name it. To name it is to give it border and boundary. But the spaces between numbers have no borders. They are infinite, and infinity makes hungry guests." She closed the book. Returned it to the cart in its sequence. Came back to me. "How many repetitions on page seventy-two?" she asked. "929." "And the thing in the chasm. Did you

count its edges?" I had. Without meaning to. Seven edges visible. Twelve implied. Nineteen total, though nineteen was an estimate, and estimation is controlled counting, which means I had already given it number. "Yes," I said. Mrs. Gershwin took the book from my hands. It left heat marks on my palms, red and precise. She closed it without looking at page seventy-two. "Then it knows you now," she said. "And when you reach page 1,000, it will have a name."

Chapter

FIVE

written by typewriter_tom

I stood there with burned palms. The marks were symmetrical. Perfect rectangles where my thumbs had pressed the front cover. Where my fingers had held the spine. Nine points of contact. All red. All throbbing. Mrs. Gershwin set the book on my desk. It sat there radiating heat I could feel from two feet away. "You're going to finish it," she said. "No." "You already started counting the thing. You can't uncount." "I can stop reading." She smiled. It wasn't kind. "You've worked here six years, two months, eleven days. You've never stopped counting anything. You counted the ceiling tiles your first week. All 1,847 of them. You counted the carpet fibers in a one-inch square. You counted the seconds between my blinks during your interview." "Forty-seven seconds," I said. "You were nervous." "I wasn't nervous. I was timing you. Seeing if you'd break eye contact to look at a clock." She touched the book's cover. Didn't flinch from the heat. "You didn't. You counted in your head. You're always counting in your head. That's why the library chose you." "The library doesn't choose." "The library always chooses. It just takes six years to be sure." She walked to the window. Dawn had broken wrong. The light outside was coming from too many angles. Shadows fell in directions that violated the sun's position. "The first librarian wrote Rule Six in 1947. She lasted eight months after that. The second lasted three years. The third made it to eleven. The fourth held on for eighteen

years, but she stopped sleeping. Stopped eating. Just counted until her heart forgot its rhythm." "And you?" "Nine years, three months, two days." She turned from the window. "I've been waiting for my replacement. The library takes time finding someone who counts correctly." My palms burned. I looked down at them. The red marks were darkening. Spreading. Underneath the skin, I could see something moving. Not veins. Not blood. Something threading through the capillaries like ink through water. "It's inside me," I said. "Just the counting part. The part that looked into the chasm and numbered what it saw." She came back to the desk. Opened the book to page seventy-two. The chasm had doubled in width. The thing at the bottom had grown a second appendage. Both were reaching upward. "When you finish the book, when you reach the single repetition on page 1,000, you'll speak the sentence aloud. Everyone does. And when you speak it, the thing will have its name. It will come through completely." "Then I won't read it." "You will. Because the alternative is worse." She turned the book around. Showed me page seventy-three. The spaces between words had become rooms. Small geometric chambers carved into the white space. In each chamber, a shape. Human-sized. Human-adjacent. Curled in positions that suggested waiting or sleeping or death. "Every librarian who didn't finish the count ended up in the between-spaces. Not dead. Not alive. Just uncounted. Existing in the gaps where the library can't see them." I counted the chambers on the visible page. Fourteen. I stopped myself before I could estimate how many chambers filled the remaining pages. Mrs. Gershwin closed the book. "You have a choice. Finish counting and face what comes through. Or stop counting and become what hides between." She picked up her purse from drawer B-7. Put on her coat from hook number three. "I'm going home. I've been here nine years, three months, two days, and sixteen hours. My replacement has been chosen. My time is counted." "Wait." She stopped at the door. "What happened to the sixth librarian?" I asked. "You said there were six. You're the fifth." "The sixth hasn't started yet." She looked at my burned palms. At the darkness spreading underneath. "But

she will. At exactly 9:23 a.m. When she picks up the book again. When she turns to page seventy-three and continues counting." She left. The door swung shut behind her. Locked automatically. I looked at the clock. 9:17 a.m. I looked at my hands. The darkness had reached my wrists. I looked at the book. At 9:23, I opened it.

Chapter

SIX

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One turned to page seventy-three precisely as the minute hand aligned with its appointed mark. The chambers were not empty. One had supposed them to be vacant geometries, spaces awaiting occupation. One had been incorrect. Within the nearest chamber, no larger than a postage stamp, a figure sat with its knees drawn to its chest. The posture was familiar. One had sat thus on the third day of employment, in the supply closet, when the patron count had reached two hundred and seven and one's ability to maintain professional composure had reached its limit. The figure turned its head. It possessed one's face, precisely rendered in miniature. It made no sound, but its lips moved, counting. One withdrew one's gaze. Examined the spreading darkness beneath one's skin instead. The progression was measurable. Seven millimeters past the wrist bones now. Rate of advancement: three millimeters per four minutes, if the previous measurement at 9:17 had been accurate. One calculated time until the darkness reached one's elbows. Seventeen minutes, forty seconds. The book's warmth had intensified. One could smell paper beginning to scorch. One read the first visible repetition. "Count what remains." The words sat in their appointed positions, but the space after "remains" had become a corridor. It stretched backward into the page's depth, walls formed from the gaps between other repetitions below and above. At the corridor's terminus, a door. One has

never trusted doors one has not counted. This door bore no number, no marking, no indication of what lay beyond. Only a handle, tarnished brass, worn smooth by use. The second repetition had lost three words. It now read, "Count remains." The subtraction was precise. "What" had been extracted entirely, leaving no gap, no scar. The remaining words had shifted to close the wound. One kept reading. By the nineteenth repetition, the sentence had reduced to "Count." By the thirty-seventh, only a period remained, hovering in white space like a pupil in an empty socket. One's hands had begun to shake. Not from fear. One had counted fear's physical manifestations many times: elevated pulse, shallow breathing, pupil dilation. This was different. The darkness spreading through one's veins was pulling at something, tugging rhythmically, as though one's blood had acquired tide. The chambers multiplied as one read. Page seventy-three held fourteen. Page seventy-four, twenty-nine. Page seventy-five, sixty-one. The sequence was predictable: each sum derived from doubling the previous and adding one. One could project that page eighty would contain 8,093 chambers. Page eighty-five, 266,239. By page ninety, the chambers would exceed the atoms in the paper fiber. They would have to exist between existence, nested in the spaces too small for measurement. In the chamber on page seventy-six, position three, row two, a woman in a cardigan was counting with her lips. She looked older than Mrs. Gershwin. Her glasses sat crooked on her nose. She had stopped at 847, the number of words visible on the first fallen book's splayed pages. She had been counting that number for some time, one suspected. Perhaps years. One closed the book. This was not a decision. Decisions require choice. One simply found one's hands enacting closure, the covers meeting with a sound like a door sealing. The library held its breath. The climate control system continued its forty-two percent humidity maintenance, but the air itself seemed to suspend its molecular motion. Waiting. One opened one's desk drawer. Retrieved the metal ruler, twelve inches, measurement tool 3,848. Placed it on the book's cover. The ruler began to warp, bending upward in the center as though the book were exerting gravitational force. One

removed the ruler. Set it aside. Opened the book again, not to page seventy-three but to page one thousand. This was violation of sequence, corruption of proper counting, and one felt the transgression in one's chest like a physical blow. But one needed to see what Mrs. Gershwin had known, what every librarian before her had learned. Page one thousand held a single sentence: "Count what remains: the Sixth Librarian's name is, " The final word was blank. Not absent. Not a gap. An empty space where a word would arrive only when summoned by proper counting, by reading each page in its appointed order, by following the sequence to its designated terminus. One looked at one's hands. The darkness had reached one's elbows. One turned back to page seventy-three and resumed counting at 9:31 a.m.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Sammy Hall

I got to repetition number 829 before I realized I was reading out loud. Not the words. The numbers between them. The space measurements. "Seven millimeters. Eleven millimeters. Fifteen point three millimeters." My voice sounded wrong in the empty library, thin and echoey, like I was talking from inside a tin can. The darkness had reached my shoulders. I could feel it moving through my collarbones now, little threads of it tickling the underside of my clavicle. It didn't hurt exactly. More like that feeling when your foot's asleep and the pins-and-needles are just starting, except everywhere at once, and also the pins were counting. That's what it felt like. Like being counted from the inside out. Page seventy-nine had 862 chambers. I didn't mean to count them but my eyes did it automatically, the same way your tongue counts your teeth when you're nervous. In chamber forty-seven, there was a young man in a vest. Librarian vest, the kind with the little pockets for pencils and call number slips. He was maybe twenty-five. He was writing something in a notebook, over and over, same motion, wrist curling, wrist lifting. Same sentence probably. I wondered if he could see me looking. The book was hot enough now that I had to shift my grip every thirty seconds. My palms were past burned. They'd gone into some other category, some state where the nerves had given up trying to report conditions and just sent up static instead. When I touched the

page edges, they left scorch marks on my fingerprints. I turned to page eighty. The sentence had changed again. Not reduced this time. Expanded. Like whatever had been eating the words had suddenly gotten full and started vomiting them back up in the wrong order. "Count what remains what Count remains Count what what remains." The repetitions cascaded down the page, 793 of them, each one a little different, words swapping positions like they were playing musical chairs. By the bottom of the page the sentence had shattered completely into just a pile of words: "Count Count what Count remains what what remains Count." My left eye started twitching. Twelve twitches per minute. I counted. The chambers on page eighty didn't double-plus-one like they were supposed to. There were exactly 8,000. I knew because each one had a number printed above it now, tiny figures in a font I didn't recognize. Chamber 5,003 held a woman who looked like me but wasn't. Same height, same hair pulled back wrong, same stupid way of standing with weight on one foot. But her hands were different. She had pianist hands, long fingers, the kind that can stretch a ninth. My fingers only make it to an octave. She was holding a book. She was reading page eighty. I looked up from the page. Looked around the library, at the actual physical room I was sitting in, just to make sure it was still there. It was. Same 1,847 ceiling tiles. Same warped third stair leading to the second floor. Same smell of old paper and lemon floor cleaner. But the light was wrong. It was coming from the pages now, not from the fluorescent fixtures. Pale white glow like a phone screen at midnight, washing out the colors of everything. The red of my palms looked gray. The wood of my desk looked gray. Everything looked like a photocopy of itself. The darkness had reached my jaw. I could feel it threading through the muscles, counting them one by one. Twenty-six muscles in the human jaw, working in pairs. The darkness knew all of them by name, Latin names, names I'd never learned. It whispered them as it moved. Masseter. Temporalis. Pterygoid. I turned to page eighty-one. My hands did this without consulting me first. The chambers were arranged in a spiral now, 16,001 of them, tightening toward a center

point that hurt to look at. In that center something was waiting. Not the thing from the chasm. Something else. Something that had always been there, in the exact middle of the between-spaces, the point where all the uncounted things orbited like planets around a star. It was an empty chair. Librarian chair. Wooden. High-backed. The kind you see in old photographs of old libraries, before ergonomics was invented. It had my name on it. Not written. Carved. Deep letters like someone had spent years digging them in. I checked the clock. 9:47 a.m. The darkness had reached my tongue.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Priya Nair

The darkness had reached my tongue, and I could taste the numbers. They were metallic, like copper pennies on a summer sidewalk. I tried to swallow, but my jaw was busy counting its own muscles, like a metronome ticking away. Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight... no, twenty-six was correct. The darkness knew its Latin names, and I knew my math. The chair, my chair, sat in the center of the spiral, looking like it had been waiting for me since the dawn of time. Or at least since the last time the library's carpets were vacuumed, which, if I recalled correctly, was Tuesday. Tuesdays were always vacuum days, a quirk of the custodian's schedule that I'd grown accustomed to over the years. "Okay, okay," I said, not to the chair, but to the darkness, to the numbers, to the whole shebang. "I get it. You want me to sit down, take the reins, become the Sixth Librarian." My voice sounded like a parody of itself, a comedic impression of fear and resignation. I chuckled, and the sound was so ridiculous that I laughed again, louder this time, until my diaphragm hurt and my eyes watered. The laughter was a distraction, a brief reprieve from the counting, but it didn't last. The darkness seeped into my lungs, and I coughed up a lungful of numerals. Ah, the wonders of being a human abacus. As I hacked away, a figure emerged from the spiral, walking toward me with a gait that was almost, but not quite, familiar. It was me, or rather, another me, one

with pianist hands and a haircut that didn't look like it had been styled by a lawnmower. She approached, book in hand, page eighty-one open to the same spiral that was unraveling before my eyes. "You're doing it wrong," she said, voice like a gentle breeze on a summer day. "You're counting the wrong things." I looked at her, and for a moment, our eyes locked, and I saw myself staring back, saw the fear, the confusion, and the desperate attempt to make sense of it all. I shook my head, and the moment passed. "What's the right way, then?" I asked, my voice laced with sarcasm, a defense mechanism that was rapidly becoming my default setting. The other me smiled, and her eyes crinkled at the corners. "You need to count the silences," she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "The spaces between the words, the moments between the numbers. That's where the real counting happens." I raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite myself. "And how do I do that?" The other me leaned in, her voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. "You need to listen to the quiet. The quiet is where the magic happens, where the numbers reveal their secrets."

I snorted, a burst of laughter that was more like a sob. "The quiet? You mean the sound of my own sanity unraveling?" The other me chuckled, a low, throaty sound that was both familiar and strange. "No, I mean the sound of the library itself. The creaks and groans, the rustle of pages, the whisper of words in the darkness. That's where the real counting happens." I looked around, and for the first time, I really listened. The library was alive, and it was speaking to me in a language that was both familiar and strange. The creaks and groans were like a metronome, marking the rhythm of the counting. The rustle of pages was like a gentle breeze, whispering secrets in my ear. And the whisper of words in the darkness... that was the most seductive sound of all, a siren's call that beckoned me deeper into the heart of the library. I took a deep breath, feeling the darkness recede, just a little. The numbers were still there, but they were no longer the only thing I could hear. I looked at the other me, and she smiled, as if she knew a secret that I was just beginning to uncover. "Count the silences," she said again, her voice

barely above a whisper. And with that, she vanished, leaving me alone with the chair, the spiral, and the quiet. The quiet was almost deafening, a palpable presence that filled the space around me. I felt it in my bones, a vibration that was both calming and terrifying. I took another deep breath, and this time, I listened. The library spoke to me in a language that was both familiar and strange, a language of numbers and silences, of words and whispers. And I listened, really listened, for the first time in my life. As I sat there, the darkness seeping into my skin, I felt the numbers recede, just a little.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

wordsbylena

The silence is the key.

jmarsh

Counting the silences feels like finally hearing the library's heartbeat.

Ruth Ann Keller

The silence will always find you.

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more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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