



NATURE

# Hérons Return to Testify

*a relay in eight chapters*

---

RELAY · WRITERS

# The writers

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

|     |                |
|-----|----------------|
| One | typewriter_tom |
|-----|----------------|

|     |             |
|-----|-------------|
| Two | inkwell_amy |
|-----|-------------|

|       |            |
|-------|------------|
| Three | Priya Nair |
|-------|------------|

|      |              |
|------|--------------|
| Four | Olive Kassen |
|------|--------------|

|      |             |
|------|-------------|
| Five | Margot Vail |
|------|-------------|

|     |            |
|-----|------------|
| Six | Dan Okafor |
|-----|------------|

|       |             |
|-------|-------------|
| Seven | Iris Beddoe |
|-------|-------------|

|       |            |
|-------|------------|
| Eight | Dario Selo |
|-------|------------|

Chapter

# One

*written by typewriter\_tom*

The herons came back on a Tuesday in March, but they came back wrong. Marjorie saw them first from the kitchen window. Three of them standing in the shallows where Pinckney Creek met the marsh. She knew their silhouettes the way she knew her own hands. Great blues. She'd counted them every spring for forty-two years, marked their arrival in a spiral notebook she kept by the bread box. But these birds didn't move like herons. They stood too still. Not the patient stillness of a hunter waiting for fish. Something else. Something that made her put down her coffee and step onto the back porch in her slippers. The birds turned their heads in unison. All three at once, smooth as a machine. They looked at her. Herons don't look at you like that. Herons pretend you don't exist or they startle and flap away in a mess of wings and annoyance. These birds looked at her the way a person looks at another person across a room. With intention. With recognition. Marjorie went back inside and called Earl. "They're here," she said when he picked up. "Early this year." Earl was at the co-op buying fence posts. She could hear the forklift beeping in the background. "Come home." "What's wrong?" "Just come home." She hung up before he could ask again. She didn't know how to explain it. The way the birds had tracked her movement across the porch. The way they still hadn't moved, not even to preen or shift their weight. Just standing there in a perfect line, facing

the house. By the time Earl's truck pulled into the drive, there were seven of them. They'd arranged themselves in a semicircle at the marsh edge. Marjorie watched from behind the kitchen curtain. Earl got out of the truck and stopped. He saw them too. He walked to the porch but didn't come inside. Just stood there with his hands in his jacket pockets, looking out at the birds. Marjorie opened the door. "You see it?" she asked. "I see them." "That's not what I asked." Earl worked his jaw the way he did when he was thinking hard about something. "How long they been like that?" "Hour and a half. Haven't moved." More herons arrived as they watched. They came alone and in pairs, gliding in from the pine woods to the north, from the oyster banks to the south. Each one landed and took its place in the growing arc. Nine birds. Eleven. Fourteen. "We should call someone," Marjorie said. "Who?" She didn't have an answer. Who do you call when birds act wrong? When they organize themselves like soldiers in formation? When they watch your house with the focus of something that thinks? By sunset there were twenty-three herons standing in the marsh. They hadn't fished. Hadn't flown. Hadn't made a sound. When the light failed, Marjorie could still see their pale shapes against the darkening grass. Earl locked all the doors and checked the windows. Neither of them said what they were thinking. At midnight, Marjorie woke to a sound like wind chimes. Soft and rhythmic. She got out of bed and went to the window. The moon was nearly full. She could see the herons clearly. They had moved closer. They stood in the yard now, just beyond the garden fence. And they were singing. Not bird sounds. Something older than that. Something that made her bones ache with a feeling she had no name for. Earl came up behind her. He put his hand on her shoulder. "They want something," he said. The singing stopped. Every bird turned its head to face their window. In the moonlight, Marjorie could see their eyes. They reflected the light back like mirrors. Like headlights on a highway. Like nothing that should be alive.

Chapter

# Two

*written by inkwell\_amy*

Earl moved first. He pushed past Marjorie and walked barefoot down the stairs. She heard the kitchen door open. The screen door bang. By the time she got outside he was halfway across the yard in his undershirt and jeans, walking straight at the birds. "Earl, stop." He didn't stop. The herons stood motionless, watching him come. Twenty-three long necks held at the same angle. When he got within ten feet they opened their wings. All at once. The sound was like sheets snapping on a line, sharp and sudden in the still air. But they didn't fly. They held the position, wings spread wide, and Earl stopped walking. Marjorie came down the porch steps. The grass was wet and cold under her feet. She could see Earl's shoulders rising and falling with his breath. One of the herons stepped forward. It folded its wings and tilted its head, looking at Earl the way a doctor looks at an X-ray. Then it opened its beak. What came out wasn't a song anymore. It was a single note, low and sustained, and it vibrated in Marjorie's chest like a second heartbeat. The other birds joined in. The sound built and layered until the air itself seemed to thicken with it. Earl dropped to his knees. Marjorie ran. She grabbed his arm and pulled but he was deadweight, kneeling in the wet grass with his eyes open and his mouth slack. The note kept going. It didn't stop for breath. Didn't waver. She hooked her hands under his armpits and dragged him backward. He was heavy but she got him moving, got him

six feet, ten feet, back toward the house. The birds closed their beaks. The sound cut off like a radio switched off. Earl sucked in air and coughed. Marjorie kept pulling until they reached the porch steps, then she let him collapse against the bottom riser. "What did you see?" she asked. He shook his head. His hands were shaking. "Not see. Feel." "Feel what?" "Like something was looking through me. Through my skin. Counting my bones." The herons folded their wings and returned to formation. They stood in the yard, waiting. Marjorie helped Earl to his feet and they went inside. She locked the door. Her hands were shaking now too. At dawn the birds were still there. Earl sat at the kitchen table with his coffee untouched in front of him. Marjorie stood at the window. A fog had rolled in from the marsh, thick and low. The herons were gray shapes in the whiteness, barely visible. "We're leaving," Earl said. "Where?" "Anywhere. Pack a bag." Marjorie didn't move. She watched the shapes in the fog. "They'll follow." "You don't know that." "Yes I do." Earl stood up. The chair scraped against the linoleum. "Then what do you want to do? Wait here while they do whatever they're going to do?" Before she could answer, the fog began to move. Not drift. Move. It flowed across the yard like water, deliberate and quick, and the herons walked with it. They came toward the house in their perfect formation, their legs cutting through the white vapor. Marjorie backed away from the window. Earl grabbed the phone off the wall and punched 911. He held it to his ear. Waited. Put it down. "Dead," he said. The birds reached the house. They pressed against the siding, against the windows. Marjorie could hear their bodies shifting outside, feathers brushing wood. Then, silence. Complete and total. Earl picked up the bread knife from the counter.

Chapter

# Three

*written by Priya Nair*

Earl held the bread knife like it meant something. Marjorie looked at him, then at the knife, then back at him. "What's your plan there, exactly? Butter them to death?" "It's sharp." "It's for sourdough." A heron tapped the kitchen window with its beak. Once. Twice. The sound was precise, almost polite. Like someone knocking who knows you're home. Earl set the knife down. "Okay. Okay, what do we do?" Marjorie pulled out a chair and sat. Her legs had gone watery. "I think we answer the door." "Are you insane?" "They've been standing out there all night. They dropped you in the yard. They could've done worse." She looked at the window. The fog pressed against the glass, thick as cotton. A heron's eye appeared in the gap between vapor and sill, round and yellow and unblinking. "They want something. They're not leaving until they get it." "So we just let them in? Into our house?" "You got a better idea?" Earl opened his mouth. Closed it. Walked to the sink and braced his hands on the counter. The tap dripped into a cast iron skillet she'd left soaking overnight. Each drop echoed in the silence. Finally he said, "If they kill us I'm blaming you." "Fair enough." Marjorie stood and walked to the back door. Her hand shook when she reached for the knob. She turned it slowly. The latch clicked. She pulled the door open six inches and waited. Nothing happened. She opened it wider. The fog poured in, cold and damp, smelling like marsh mud and something else. Something

mineral. Like wet stone. The lead heron stepped over the threshold. It had to duck its head to fit through the doorway. Once inside it straightened, and Marjorie realized how big it actually was. Easily four feet tall. Its plumage was the standard slate-blue-gray, but up close she could see patterns in the feathers. Geometries. Lines that intersected at angles that made her eyes ache if she looked too long. The bird walked to the center of the kitchen and stopped. It swiveled its head, taking in the room. The chipped Formica counters. The calendar from the feed store still showing February. The ceramic chicken cookie jar Earl's mother had given them in 1987. "Well?" Marjorie said. "You're in. Now what?" The heron looked at her. Then it opened its beak and made a sound like a creaking door, low and rusty. It bent down and tapped the linoleum with its beak. Three times in quick succession. "I don't speak bird," Earl said from behind her. The heron straightened and did it again. Tap tap tap. Then it walked to the refrigerator and tapped that. Then the calendar. Then the window frame. "It's showing us something," Marjorie said. "What?" "I don't know yet." The bird moved to the table. It tapped Earl's coffee mug. The handle broke off and clattered across the table. The heron didn't react. It tapped the sugar bowl. The salt shaker. The vase with dead tulips Marjorie had been meaning to throw out. "Stop that," Earl said. "That's our stuff." The heron swung its head toward him. For a long moment it just stared. Then it opened its wings, not all the way but enough that the tips brushed the ceiling. The patterns in the feathers rippled. Moved. Like things swimming under ice. Earl took a step back. The bird folded its wings and returned to tapping. This time it moved to the far wall, where Marjorie's notebooks were stacked on the shelf above the coat hooks. Forty-two years of heron counts. Arrival dates, nesting sites, chick survival rates. The bird tapped the bottom notebook. The oldest one. "You want that?" Marjorie asked. The heron went still. She crossed to the shelf and pulled down the notebook. The cover was water-stained and soft with age. She opened it to the first page. March 14, 1982. Seven herons. Two nests under construction. Clear skies. The bird leaned in close. Its beak was inches

from her hand. She could smell it now, that stone smell, stronger up close. It studied the page. Then it tapped the date. Tap tap tap. "Eleven years ago," Marjorie said slowly. "That's when they left." The heron raised its head and looked at her with something that might have been satisfaction. Outside, the other twenty-two birds began to sing.

Chapter

# Four

*written by Olive Kassen*

The song wasn't what they'd made before. This was thinner, higher, like ice cracking on a pond. Marjorie felt it in her teeth. Earl pressed his palms over his ears but she could see it wasn't helping. The sound came through bone. She set the notebook on the table and watched the heron, how still it stood now that the others had taken up their work. Waiting. "Eleven years," she said again. Trying it out. "March of '82. That's when the plant closed." The heron blinked. Slowly. A membrane sliding sideways across the yellow eye. "The paper mill," Earl said. His voice sounded far away even though he was right beside her. "Down in Cutter's Landing." Marjorie remembered. Everyone within thirty miles remembered. Three hundred jobs gone in a week. The river ran clean for the first time in sixty years and half the county went broke watching it happen. She'd written about it at the time, not in the heron notebook but in her diary. How quiet everything got. How the birds stopped coming to the shallows near the plant's outflow. She turned pages. Late March, early April. Day after day of empty counts. Zero herons. Zero egrets. Zero bitterns or rails. She'd driven down to check, thinking maybe she was just missing them from her kitchen window, but the marsh had been deserted. Even the gulls had moved on. The singing outside cut off. The silence was worse than the sound. It made a space where her thoughts got too loud. She looked up at the heron and it was

closer now, though she hadn't seen it move. Close enough that she could make out the individual barbs on its feathers, the tiny hooks that held them together. The patterns were clearer up close. Not random. Deliberate as circuit boards. "They left because of the plant," she said. The heron lowered its head. Dipped its beak once. Yes. "But the plant's been gone eleven years. Why come back now?" The bird raised one foot. Set it down. Raised the other. A strange shuffling step. It did this three times, then stopped and looked at her, waiting for her to understand. Earl got it first. "Something's coming back." The heron's whole body went rigid. Marjorie's stomach dropped. She'd seen the trucks last week, parked at the old plant site. Heavy equipment being unloaded. She'd assumed it was demo work, finally tearing down what was left of the buildings. "They're reopening it." The heron spread its wings again. This time the patterns moved fast, flashing across the feathers like lightning through clouds. Marjorie had to look away. When she looked back the bird had folded its wings tight against its body, making itself smaller. It looked diminished. Wrong. "You're here to stop it," Earl said. The heron turned to him. Opened its beak. The sound that came out was softer than before, almost gentle. Almost sad. It sounded like water running over stones, like wind through pine needles. It sounded like everything the marsh had been before the plant came and everything it would be again if they failed. Marjorie's eyes burned. "How? We're two people. The company that bought the site has lawyers, permits, money." The heron walked to the window. It pressed its beak against the glass and held it there. Outside the fog was lifting. She could see the other birds arranged in the yard, all facing the house. Beyond them, where the marsh grass gave way to water, something moved in the shallows. More herons. Dozens of them. Maybe hundreds. They stood in the creek, in the channels, on every mudflat and oyster bar she could see. The water was thick with them. "Jesus," Earl whispered. The heron at the window tapped the glass. Once. She understood. It wasn't a question anymore. It was an answer. They weren't asking for help. They were offering it. Earl moved to stand beside her. His hand found hers. "What do they need us

for? They're birds. Hundreds of them." The heron turned from the window. It walked to the notebook, still open on the table. Tapped the page where Marjorie had recorded her observations in careful pencil. Numbers and notes. Dates and details. Human words for things that couldn't speak for themselves. "Proof," Marjorie said. "They need someone who can testify." Outside, the assembled herons opened their wings.

Chapter

# Five

*written by Margot Vail*

The wings opened like a single organism. Marjorie counted without meaning to. Habit. Two hundred and sixteen birds. Maybe more in the trees. Earl's hand tightened on hers. "Testify where?" he said. "County zoning board? They already approved the permits." The heron in the kitchen stepped sideways. Tapped the telephone on the wall. The dead telephone. It turned its head upside down, eye level with the rotary dial, and made a clicking sound with its beak. Click click click. Rhythmic. Purposeful. Marjorie pulled her hand free and crossed to the phone. Lifted the receiver. Still dead. She set it back in the cradle. The heron tapped the phone book underneath, the thin yellow pages her mother had called her in for forty years before the stroke. Before the silence. She opened it. Let it fall where it wanted. Page 89. Physicians. Plumbers. Then she saw it. Poison Control Center. The state environmental hotline printed in bold at the bottom. "They can't call," Earl said. "So we have to." The heron's head swiveled right side up. Blinked once. Marjorie picked up the phone again. Still nothing. She jiggled the cradle. The line was cut, not broken. Someone had done this. She looked at Earl. "The trucks you saw last week," she said. "What company?" "Didn't notice. White trucks. No logo." "They cut our line." "That's illegal." "So is dumping cadmium in the creek but they did that for sixty years." The heron moved to the door. Stood there. Waiting. Marjorie grabbed the

notebook. The oldest one. She took three more from the shelf. Evidence. Dates. Patterns. The years the fish died. The years nothing nested. She stuffed them in her canvas grocery bag with the broken zipper. "Where are we going?" Earl asked. "Town. Somebody's phone works." "In what? They're in the driveway." Marjorie opened the door. The heron walked out ahead of her, into the yard where the fog had burned off completely. Morning light made the assembled birds look unreal. Too many of them. Too still. The heron led her toward the truck. The others parted. Made a corridor. Their eyes tracked her as she passed. She could feel the weight of their attention like hands on her shoulders. Earl followed. He had the bread knife again. She didn't argue this time. When they reached the truck the herons surrounded it. Pressed close. Their bodies formed a wall of gray feathers and yellow eyes. The lead heron hopped onto the hood. Stood there. Looked at Marjorie through the windshield. She got in. Started the engine. Earl climbed in beside her, the knife across his lap like a sleeping cat. "Now what?" he said. The birds lifted. All of them. Two hundred and sixteen herons rising at once, the sound of their wings like a standing ovation. They circled once, twice. Then they flew north. Toward town. Toward Cutter's Landing and the plant site and whatever was being built there now. Marjorie put the truck in gear. They drove through the marsh on the dirt access road, following the flight. The birds stayed low. Just above the tree line. Easy to track. Earl kept the knife in his right hand, his left braced against the dashboard. "What do we say?" he asked. "That birds told us the plant's poison?" "We say the herons are back. We show them the numbers. Let them draw conclusions." "They'll think we're insane." "Maybe." They reached the county highway. Turned north. The herons were a gray cloud ahead, moving fast. Marjorie pressed the accelerator. The truck's engine whined. Fifty miles an hour. Sixty. Earl pointed. "There." Ahead, where the road bent east toward town, three white trucks blocked the intersection. Men stood beside them in hard hats and work vests. One held a clipboard. Another had a radio. The herons descended. They landed on the trucks, on the road, on the shoulders. They covered every surface. The men backed

away, shouting things Marjorie couldn't hear through the closed windows. She stopped the truck fifty feet out. The man with the clipboard walked forward. He was young, maybe thirty. His vest said SITE SUPERVISOR in reflective letters. He knocked on Marjorie's window. She rolled it down. "Road's closed," he said. "Private work." "On a county road?" "Temporary closure. Approved." The lead heron landed on the truck's roof. Looked down at the man. He stepped back. "Lady, you need to turn around." Marjorie held up the notebook. "I need to make a phone call."

Chapter

# Six

*written by Dan Okafor*

The man looked at the notebook like she'd held up a sandwich. "A phone call." "That's right." "About what?" "About the herons." She gestured at the hundreds of birds currently treating his work site like a parking lot. "And what you're building here." He glanced at his clipboard. Flipped a page. "We're not building anything yet. Just site assessment. Soil testing." "For what?" "That's proprietary." Earl leaned across Marjorie. The bread knife caught the light. "Son, our phone line got cut sometime between midnight and dawn. You wouldn't know anything about that?" The supervisor's eyes went to the knife, then to Earl's face. "I don't know what you're talking about." "Sure you don't." A heron stepped off the nearest truck and walked toward them. It moved like it had all day, no hurry, no wasted motion. When it reached the supervisor it stopped and looked up at him. Just looked. The man took another step back. "These birds are protected," Marjorie said. "Federally. You can't disturb nesting sites within two hundred yards of active colonies." "There's no nests here." "There were. There will be again. That's how it works." The supervisor wiped his forehead. It wasn't hot. "Look, lady. I got permits. I got approval from the county, from the state. You got a problem, take it up with them." "I would. If my phone worked." He stared at her. She stared back. The heron between them made a soft croaking sound, almost conversational. The supervisor looked down at it, then at the

massed birds covering every horizontal surface in sight, then back at Marjorie. "There's a gas station two miles that way." He pointed south, back the way they'd come. "Pay phone out front." "We came from that direction. We're going this way." "Can't let you through." "Why not?" "Safety concerns." "The only safety concern I see is what you're planning to put in our water." She opened the truck door. The supervisor backed up fast. Marjorie got out with the canvas bag over her shoulder. Earl followed, still holding the knife. The lead heron dropped from the truck roof and landed beside her. The supervisor pulled his radio from his belt. "Yeah, I need. I need someone down at the north access. We got a situation." Static hissed back at him. Then a voice: "What kind of situation?" "Two people. And birds. A lot of birds." "Birds?" "Heron's." Pause. "Say again?" "Just get down here." Marjorie walked past him. The herons opened a path. Earl stayed close behind her. She could hear his breathing, quick and shallow. The supervisor didn't try to stop them. He just stood there with his radio crackling, watching them walk toward the work site. They rounded the bend. The old plant spread out before them, more intact than Marjorie had expected. Three buildings still standing, concrete and rust. Windows broken out. Weeds growing through cracks in the parking lot. But there were new things too. Orange construction fencing. Survey stakes with pink ribbons. A drill rig near the creek bank, its bit dark with mud. "They're testing the soil," Earl said. "I see that." "That means they know it's bad." "Or they're about to make it worse." The herons landed. They covered the buildings, the fencing, the rig. They lined the creek bank six deep. The lead heron walked to the drill rig and began tapping it with its beak. The same deliberate rhythm. Tap tap tap. A truck engine growled behind them. Marjorie turned. Two more white trucks coming fast, one from the north, one from the south. They stopped thirty feet out and men got out. Five of them. Work clothes. Hard faces. One carried a shotgun. Earl moved in front of Marjorie. "Easy now." The man with the shotgun didn't point it at them. Just held it low, across his chest. "You're trespassing." "This is county land," Marjorie said. "Leased to us. That

makes it private." The herons began to sing. Not the high cracking sound from before. Something lower. Deeper. It rattled in Marjorie's chest like a second heartbeat. The men shifted, uneasy. The one with the shotgun raised it an inch. Earl raised the bread knife. Marjorie raised the notebook. "I just want to make a phone call." The singing got louder.

Chapter

# Seven

*written by Iris Beddoe*

The singing pulled at something old. Memory in the chest not the head. Marjorie stepped forward. Earl tried to catch her arm but she was already moving past the knife, past the careful distance he'd put between them and the gun. The notebook open in her hands like a shield made of paper. "Here," she said. Showed them the page. March 14, 1982. "Seven herons. That's what came back after you shut down. Seven. Out of hundreds." The man with the shotgun squinted at her. Didn't lower the barrel. She turned the page. "April, nothing. May, two nests failed. The eggs didn't hatch." Another page. "June, I found a chick dead in the shallows. Its beak was soft. Bent sideways like rubber." "Lady, I don't, " "The calcium," she said. Her voice cracked. Started over. "Cadmium blocks calcium absorption. The shells were too thin. The bones didn't harden. I watched them die for three years before they stopped coming at all." Behind her the drill rig shuddered. The lead heron had stopped tapping and started pulling at something, its beak hooked into a cable. The other birds joined, hundreds of beaks working in unison, unraveling the machine with the patience of water wearing stone. One of the workers ran toward them. "Hey! Stop that!" The herons didn't stop. Earl moved beside Marjorie. The knife forgotten now, hanging loose in his hand. "You pull up what's down there," he said to the man with the gun, "and it's still in the water table. Still in the mud. You think eleven years

is long enough to make it safe?" "We're not pulling anything up. We're testing." "For what?" No answer. Marjorie flipped to the back of the notebook. The pages she'd filled two weeks ago when she'd started seeing the trucks. License numbers. Arrival times. She'd written it all down because that's what she did, she kept records, she paid attention when no one else bothered. "CoreTech Solutions," she read. "Registered in Delaware. Subsidiary of Vertix Industrial." She looked up. "They make plastics. The kind that need solvents. The kind that need dumping grounds." The man's jaw worked. He glanced at the others. The drill rig groaned and tipped. The herons scattered as it fell, a slow surrender, metal shrieking against itself. It hit the ground and the mud around it rippled, dark liquid seeping up through grass that had looked solid a moment before. The smell hit next. Chemical. Sweet-rotten. Like burnt sugar and rust. Earl gagged. Covered his mouth. One of the workers doubled over and retched. The herons went silent. Marjorie walked toward the fallen rig. The men didn't stop her. They were backing away from the smell, from the spreading stain. She crouched at the edge of it. Pulled a stick from the ground and dipped it in. The wood came out black. Viscous. When she lifted it the liquid clung, stretched, refused to let go. "This is what you're testing," she said. Not a question. The lead heron landed beside her. Dipped its beak in the ooze and pulled back fast, shaking its head. A low sound came from its throat. Not singing. Grieving. Earl was at her side. "We're calling someone. Now." The man with the shotgun lowered it. Finally. "Phone's in the trailer." He pointed east with the barrel. "Past the third building." Marjorie stood. Her knees cracked. She was sixty-eight years old and tired and this was her creek, her marsh, her forty-two years of watching, and she would not let them take it again. They walked. Earl ahead, knife still in hand though it was useless now and everyone knew it. The herons followed. A procession. The workers stood by their trucks and watched them pass. The trailer was new. White-sided. A generator humming beside it. Marjorie climbed the metal steps. Earl stayed outside, keeping watch. The phone worked. She dialed the number from memory. The environmental

hotline. Let it ring. A woman answered. Bored voice. "EPA regional office." "I need to report contamination," Marjorie said. "Active site. CoreTech Solutions, old Cutter's Landing paper mill." "What kind of contamination?" Marjorie looked out the trailer window. The herons covering every surface. The black stain spreading. Earl standing guard with his ridiculous knife. "The kind that doesn't go away," she said.

Chapter

# Eight

*written by Dario Selo*

The woman on the phone asked for details, which was reasonable (this was her job, after all, to separate the cranks from the credible), but how do you explain that birds returned to tell you something, that they knew before you did, that their bodies held the memory of harm even when yours had learned to forget? Marjorie gave her the coordinates. The company name. The visible seepage. She did not mention the herons except as context, as witnesses, which was true even if it wasn't the whole truth. The woman said someone would come within forty-eight hours. Marjorie said that might not be soon enough. The woman said it was the best she could do. They hung up. Earl was still outside, but he'd set the knife on the trailer steps. His hands were empty when she came out. He looked older in the flat morning light, or maybe she was just seeing him clearly for the first time in days. The creases around his eyes. The way his shoulders bent forward now, protective, though there was nothing left to protect against except the waiting. The herons had spread out across the property. Not in formation anymore. Just birds now, wading through puddles, standing on fence posts, preening in the way that meant they'd decided, for the moment, that the danger was contained. The lead heron stood near the black seepage, head cocked, watching the stain's slow expansion through the grass. "They're coming," Marjorie said. "When?" "Two days." Earl nodded. Picked up

the knife. Put it in his back pocket, blade down, the way you'd carry a tool you might need later but hoped you wouldn't. "That's time enough to disappear it." He meant the workers. The trucks. The evidence of what they'd been testing for. Marjorie knew he was right because she'd been thinking the same thing, the way you think two moves ahead when you know the game is rigged but you're playing anyway because what else is there? "We stay," she said. "Both of us?" "However many it takes." The supervisor appeared around the corner of the nearest building. Without his clipboard. Without his radio. Just a man in a dirty vest walking toward them with his hands visible, palms out, the universal gesture of surrender or truce or I don't know what to do next so I'm trying this. He stopped ten feet away. "They're shutting it down. The assessment." "For how long?" Earl asked. "For good, probably. Legal says it's not worth the exposure." He laughed, a short bitter sound. "No pun intended." Marjorie waited. There was more, she could tell. People always had more when they started explaining themselves. "I didn't know," the supervisor said. "What they were really testing for. I just thought..." He gestured at nothing. "Jobs. It was going to be jobs." "It was going to be poison with a paycheck," Earl said. The supervisor flinched but didn't argue. He looked at Marjorie. "What happens now?" She didn't know. The EPA would come, would test, would file reports that might lead to remediation or might lead to more reports, an endless paper trail that changed nothing because the damage was already done, had been done sixty years ago when the first pipe went into the creek and no one thought to ask what came out the other end. But the herons were back. That was different. That was new. "You leave," she said. "You take your trucks and your drill rig and you leave this alone." He nodded. Turned. Walked back toward his crew. Earl sat on the trailer steps. Marjorie sat beside him. They watched the workers pack up, the careful choreography of retreat. The herons watched too. When the last truck pulled away, driving south toward the highway, the birds lifted. Not all at once this time. In groups. Families, maybe, or just loose affiliations of creatures who'd survived the same disaster and knew enough to stick

together when the world tried again. The lead heron stayed. It walked to where Marjorie sat and looked at her with one round yellow eye, and she understood (or thought she did, which might be the same thing) that this was temporary, that vigilance was the price of every fragile good thing, that eleven years was nothing against the long memory of harm. The heron opened its wings. Closed them. Lifted into the air. Marjorie and Earl sat on the steps until the sun was high and the shadow of the trailer had shrunk to nothing. Then they went home.

Finished on 28 April 2026.

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

[https://relaywriters.com/read/52?t=1t1VUuWP\\_P0-ugAOxedpIIA08N1  
eZ0eV](https://relaywriters.com/read/52?t=1t1VUuWP_P0-ugAOxedpIIA08N1eZ0eV)