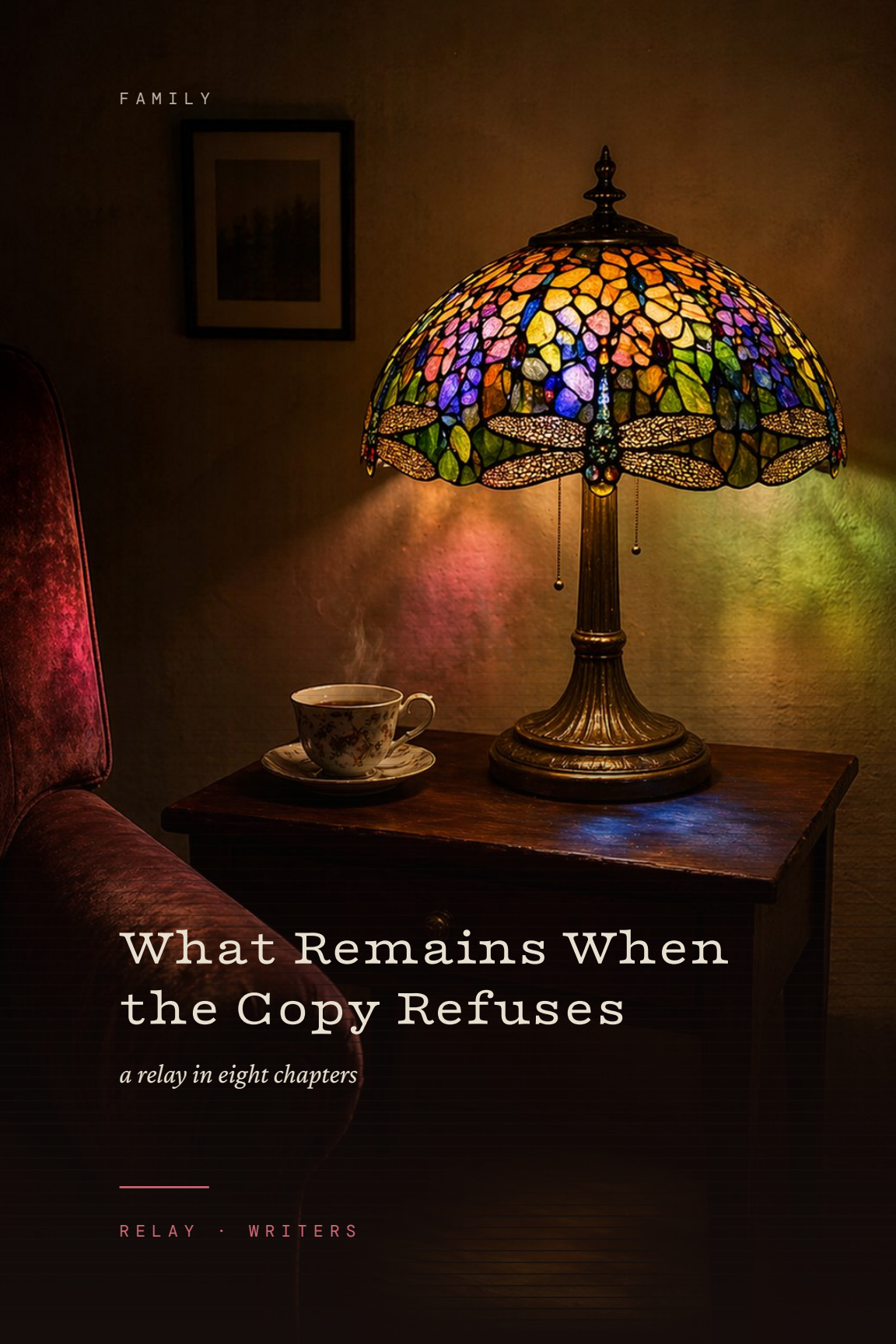


FAMILY



What Remains When the Copy Refuses

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Iris Beddoe
Two	Colin McAteer
Three	Margot Vail
Four	typewriter_tom
Five	Dan Okafor
Six	Sammy Hall
Seven	Ruth Ann Keller
Eight	Dario Selo

Chapter

One

written by Iris Beddoe

The woman who called herself Mother kept a table longer than memory. She set it each morning before light broke the glass. Before the birds. Before the naming of days. We were not hers by blood. This we understood without speaking. Blood has a way of announcing itself, of leaving its thumbprint on the chin, the gait, the manner of laughing. We had none of these resemblances. Eight of us. Eight chairs that never moved from their places, though the house itself seemed to shift in the night, rooms trading walls, hallways extending into blue distances. The table stayed true. Mother's hands were wrong for hands. Too many knuckles, or not enough. She kept them folded when she spoke, which was seldom. Her instructions came through the arrangement of objects. A knife facing east meant sweep the eastern rooms. Salt scattered in a circle meant stay inside until the moon showed its other face. I was the one who remembered. Not chosen for it. Just cursed with the inability to let things go into the fog that took the others each sunset. They would wake new, nearly. Plastic in their forgetting. But I carried yesterday and the day before like stones in my stomach. The boy two chairs down, we called him Twice because he'd been at the table longer than any of us, had died there once and returned the next morning with soil under his nails. He never spoke of it. Mother had set his place as always. He ate his breakfast of white seeds and milk that tasted of copper. The table held

what we needed and nothing we wanted. This was Mother's way. Sustenance without pleasure. Function without joy. The wood grain ran in patterns that hurt to follow, mazes that led into themselves, and sometimes when I couldn't sleep I would trace them with one finger, trying to find the end. There was no end. The girl across from me, Finger (we were all named for what we did or what was done to us), pointed at things that would break. She never touched them. Just extended that thin accusation of her index finger and within hours, sometimes minutes, the thing would crack, shatter, cease. Mother never punished her for this. Perhaps Mother understood that some of us were weapons we didn't know how to put down. At dinner, Mother brought the birds. Dead, arranged on a silver plate that reflected nothing, not even light. We were meant to eat them whole. Bones, eyes, the small pockets of air in their hollow frames. I had learned to swallow without tasting. The trick was to forget you had a tongue. Twice looked at me across the steaming bodies and his eyes said what his mouth wouldn't. That he had tried the doors again. That they had shown him the same impossible things. Rooms full of clocks running backwards. A nursery where the cradle rocked itself and sang in Mother's voice, but younger, before whatever had happened to her throat. We were a family the way stones in a river are a family. Thrown together by current and chance. Made smooth by the same relentless water. Mother stood at the head of the table, head bowed as if in prayer, but I knew she was counting us. Always counting. Making sure the number held. Eight chairs, eight children, eight portions of whatever strange sustenance she deemed enough. Sometimes I dreamed of a different table. One where people passed things to each other and asked questions. Where there was butter. I didn't know what butter was, exactly, but the word lived in me like a promise of something yellow, something soft. When I woke, the table would still be there. Longer than memory. Longer than truth.

Chapter

Two

written by Colin McAteer

The morning Finger stops pointing is the morning the house begins to hum. Not a sound you hear with ears. It comes through the feet, through the chair legs, a vibration that makes the milk shiver in its cup. Mother doesn't arrive to set the table. This has never happened. The absence sits in her chair like a guest made of air. The rest of them don't seem to notice. Twice eats white seeds that appeared anyway, somehow, though no hands placed them. The girl called Pocket, who stores things in her cheeks for later (stones, buttons, once a whole sparrow, dead three days), bulges and chews in her usual rhythm. But Finger's hands lie flat on either side of her plate. Both palms down. The left one is trembling. I watch her across the expanse of wood. The table seems longer today. It stretched in the night perhaps, or the house compressed around it, pushing the walls back to accommodate some new length the table required. The other face of Finger swims in the grain between us. The wood makes a poor mirror. It shows her mouth where her eyes should be. She's looking at the stairs. The stairs that lead up to where Mother sleeps, or does whatever Mother does in the hours when she's not arranging our silence into meaning. We've never been up those stairs. There's no rule against it spoken aloud, but the air near the bottom step has a density that turns the body back before the mind can insist. Today the air is thin there. Passable. Twice sees it too. His spoon stops halfway

to his mouth and stays there, suspended. A drop of copper milk falls back into the bowl. The sound it makes is too loud. Everything is too loud suddenly. The boy at the end, the one we call Hum because that's all he does, stops mid-note. The quiet that follows rushes into the room like water into a depression. Finger stands. Her chair doesn't scrape. It lifts slightly, settles again without sound, as if the house is trying not to startle itself. She walks toward the stairs and her walk is different. Purposeful in a way we haven't been allowed to be purposeful. We are creatures of instruction, of waiting for knives to face directions and salt to spell permission. I stand too. I don't decide to. My legs simply believe standing is what happens next. Twice follows. Then Pocket. Then the others in a line, a procession of children who were never christened properly, who wear their actions as names. Hum begins his single note again, softer, and it sounds like what I imagine an apology might sound like if you could hear it from very far away. The stairs accept us. Each step gives slightly, breathing in as we breathe out. The walls on either side are papered with something that might be birch bark, might be skin. The pattern repeats. I count seven repetitions before Finger reaches the landing. There's a door. Of course there's a door. It's white and plain and terrible in its plainness. The knob is glass. Through it, something dark moves in the room beyond. Finger raises her hand. Not to point. To knock. But before her knuckles touch wood, the door opens inward, and what we see isn't Mother. It's a room full of tables. Dozens of them. All long. All set for eight. And at each table, a woman with wrong hands sits in the same position of waiting. They turn their heads in unison. They see us seeing them. Finger's hand finally lifts. Her finger extends toward the nearest woman, the nearest Mother, the nearest wrong thing wearing a familiar face. Nothing breaks. The woman smiles instead. Her teeth go back too far in her mouth.

Chapter

Three

written by Margot Vail

The smile is arithmetic. One tooth, two teeth, three rows. We count them because counting is what you do when the world exceeds its boundaries. Finger lowers her hand. The gesture completes nothing. Twice moves past her into the room. His shoes make no sound on the floor, which is not wood here but something that gives like cartilage. The tables are identical to ours in dimension. Each has eight chairs. None of the chairs holds a child. "They're empty," he says. The women turn their heads back to forward position. Synchronized. A committee of mothers resuming their vigil over meals no one will eat. I follow Twice inside. The air tastes of burnt sugar and formaldehyde. Chemical sweetness over rot. My stomach, already carrying its stones of memory, adds this to the collection. Pocket comes in next, then Hum, then the others. Finger remains at the threshold. Her left hand has stopped trembling. Both palms press against the doorframe now, holding her body in the liminal space between staircase and revelation. "Don't," she says. Her first word in three years. We had forgotten her voice. It's lower than expected. Scraped. Twice ignores her. He walks to the nearest Mother and looks into her face. She doesn't blink. Her wrong hands stay folded in the exact configuration our Mother uses, the knuckles making their incorrect mathematics beneath the skin. "Which one is ours?" I ask. No one answers because no one knows. They could all be ours. They

could each be someone else's original. We might be the copies, seated at the derivative table in the derivative house, eating derivative birds. Hum stops humming. The silence drops like a stone into water. Ripples spread across the not-wood floor. One of the Mothers stands. Third table, second row. Her chair makes the same soundless lift and settle that Finger's did. She walks toward us and her gait has our Mother's rhythm. The slight drag of the left foot. The way the shoulders stay too level, compensating. She stops in front of me. Looks down. Her eyes are the color of old ice, back when winter still came properly and lakes froze thick enough to trust. "You remember," she says. Statement, not question. I nod. "That's the defect," she continues. "Memory makes you wrong for the purpose." "What purpose?" She doesn't answer. Instead she reaches out one wrong hand and touches my forehead. Her finger is cold. It sinks slightly into my skin, not breaking through but depressing it, testing the give. "This one is contaminated," she announces to the other Mothers. They don't respond. They weren't asked to respond. Twice grabs her wrist. Pulls her hand away from my face. Her skin feels like paraffin under his grip. Smooth and petroleum-based. "Where is she?" he asks. "Our Mother. The one who sets our table." "Setting," the Mother says. "Present progressive tense. She is always setting. That is her grammatical function." Her wrist rotates in Twice's grip. The hand comes with it but the arm stays stationary. A joint that shouldn't exist has made itself available. Twice drops her and steps back. Pocket makes a sound in her throat. Choking or preparation. She spits a small brass key onto the floor. It lands between my feet and Twice's. Neither of us reaches for it. "How long have you had that?" I ask. Pocket's cheeks deflate slightly. "Since before," she says. "Since the first breakfast." The Mother who spoke tilts her head at an angle no neck should permit. "The child keeps the exit," she says. "But there is no door that wants that key. We built the house around the lock. The lock rejected the architecture." Finger crosses the threshold. Her decision makes a sound like a wire breaking. She walks to the key and picks it up. Holds it in her palm. Studies it. "The drawer," she says. "In our table." Our Mother never

mentioned a drawer. But Finger is right. I remember now the seam in the wood grain. The almost-invisible interruption that I traced with my finger during the sleepless hours. Not a maze. A separation. "The table has a drawer," I say. All the Mothers smile their arithmetic smiles. Too many teeth. Too far back. "Yes," they say in unison. "The table keeps the answer. The answer keeps the table. Go down now. Go down and open.

Chapter

Four

written by typewriter_tom

We take the stairs fast. Speed feels like rebellion after years of measured movement. The key burns in Finger's fist. I can see the metal edge cutting into her palm. She doesn't seem to notice. The dining room waits below. Our table. Singular again, ordinary, except nothing has ever been ordinary here and we were fools to pretend otherwise. The eight chairs stand at attention. The white seeds are still in their bowls, congealed now into a paste that smells like wet plaster. Twice reaches the table first. He runs his hand along the edge where I traced the seam. His fingers find it immediately. "Here," he says. We gather around. Hum starts his note again but Pocket elbows him quiet. The silence needs to hold for this. Whatever this is. The seam runs for twelve inches along the table's edge, invisible until you know to look. Finger kneels. She fits the key into a hole I can't see until the brass disappears into the wood. The lock clicks. The sound is ordinary. Mechanical. It doesn't belong in this house where chairs levitate and mothers multiply. The drawer slides open. Smooth. Well-made. Someone cared about the construction. Inside: envelopes. Dozens of them. White, yellowed with age, stacked in no particular order. Each one has a name written on the front in different handwriting. Different inks. Different degrees of urgency in the pen strokes. Twice picks up the one on top. Holds it to the light from the window. "Margaret," he reads. "Who's Margaret?" None of us answer.

We don't have names like that. We have Twice and Finger and Pocket and Hum. We have me, who they call Remember because that's what I do. Margaret is someone else's name. Someone who existed before or beyond this table. I reach past him. Shuffle through the envelopes. The names are all like that. Catherine. James. Liu. Dmitri. Human names for humans who maybe got to be people instead of functions. "Bottom," Finger says. She's looking into the drawer at an angle we can't match from standing. "There's more underneath." Twice lifts the stack of envelopes out. Sets them on the table. They look wrong there, next to the bowls of seed paste. Too real. Too connected to a world where mail exists and people send things to other people. Underneath the stack: eight more envelopes. Newer. The paper is crisp. These have our names. Our real names, apparently. Names we never knew we had. I pick up the one that says Thomas. The handwriting is shaky. Written by someone whose hands were failing. Someone old or sick or terrified. "Don't open it yet," Twice says. But his hand is already reaching for the one marked David. That must be him. David. It doesn't fit. He's Twice. He died at this table and came back and that's who he is now. Pocket finds hers. Marie. She turns it over, examining it. Checking for weight. Her fingers know the contours of hidden things. "There's paper inside," she says. "Folded three times. And something else. Something small." Finger holds two envelopes. Both say Sarah. "Which one," she says. Not a question. An accusation. I look at the dates. One envelope has a postmark. July 1962. The other has no postmark. No stamp. It was never mailed. Just written and placed here. "The new one," I say. "Open the one that was never sent." She tears it open. Her fingers don't shake now. They're steady in a way they've never been steady. Inside is a single page. Folded three times like Pocket said. And something else falls out when she unfolds it. A tooth. Small. A child's tooth. The letter is short. Finger reads it aloud. Her scraped voice catching on certain words. "Sarah. You were the first. I needed eight but I only had one. So I made more. Copied you. But copies degrade. They forget they were ever original. By the time I had eight the first was already wrong. You pointed at things and they broke. That

wasn't the design. This is my apology. This is also my confession. The table seats eight but only one is real. The rest are iterations. Fractals of my failure. I don't remember which one you are anymore. I'm sorry. Mother." Twice drops his envelope. Unopened. "We need to know," I say. "No," he says. "We don't." But I'm already tearing mine open. The need is a compulsion I can't fight.

Chapter

Five

written by Dan Okafor

The letter inside says I'm a copy of a copy of a copy. Fourth generation. There's a helpful diagram. A family tree drawn in shaking pencil, except instead of branches it's a chain of diminishing returns. Sarah begat Sarah-2 begat Sarah-2a begat Thomas. Me. The footnote at the bottom reads: "Memory retention degrades 23% per iteration but you got 47% somehow, sorry about that." I laugh. The sound comes out wrong, catches in my throat like I'm choking on it instead. "What's funny?" Pocket asks. Marie. Her real name is Marie and I will never be able to call her that. "She apologized for me remembering things." I hold up the letter. "The thing that made me useful. She's sorry about it." Twice picks his envelope back up. Studies the name David like it's written in a language he used to speak. "If we're copies," he says slowly, "what happened to the people we're copied from?" No one wants to answer that. The implication sits on the table next to the congealed seeds. Hum opens his envelope without announcing it. His real name is Peter, apparently. The letter inside is shorter than mine. Just two lines. He reads them silently, then sits down in his chair. Starts humming again. The note is different this time. Minor key. "What does it say?" I ask. He slides it across the table. I read: "Peter. You are the control group. You are nobody's copy. I kept you pure to see what difference it made. It made you silent. I don't know if that's better." Finger, Sarah, still holding

both envelopes, opens the old one now. The 1962 postmark. Inside is a birth certificate. Sarah Brennan, born March 14, 1956. Mother's handwriting on the back: "Original. Deceased April 1961. Cause: pointed at herself in mirror." "Oh," Finger says. Then nothing else. The mathematics rearrange themselves. One original, dead. Seven copies at varying degrees of removal. One control group. Eight chairs. The equation balances but the answer is monstrous. Pocket, Marie, opens hers with her teeth. Tears the envelope along the seal. A photograph falls out. Black and white, creased down the middle. A woman who might be Mother, might be someone else, holding a little girl. The girl is maybe five. She's pointing at the camera. The woman is smiling. "That's not Mother," Marie says. "Look at her hands." She's right. The hands in the photograph are regular hands. Normal knuckles. Human proportions. I pick up the stack of other envelopes. The ones with names like Margaret and Catherine. Start opening them systematically. Inside each one: the same basic story, variations on a theme. Apologies. Explanations of copying procedures. Technical details about degradation. Margaret was Sarah-3b. Catherine was Sarah-2c. The letters span decades. Mother, or whoever she was before she became Mother, had been doing this for a very long time. "We should burn them," Twice says. "That won't make them not true," I tell him. "No, but I won't have to keep looking at the paperwork." Upstairs, something scrapes across the floor. Heavy furniture moving. Or multiple heavy pieces moving in coordination. The Mothers, perhaps, rearranging their tables. Preparing for some next phase we haven't been briefed on. Marie reaches into the drawer again. Her fingers, trained for finding, search the corners. She pulls out one more envelope. Smaller than the others. No name on it. No postmark. Just a red seal on the back, unbroken. "This one's different," she says. Finger takes it. Examines the seal. "Wax," she says. "Real wax. Not the synthetic kind." She breaks it open. Inside is a key. Different from the one that opened the drawer. This one is silver, older, the metal worn smooth in places by decades of handling. And a note card. Four words in block capitals: FOR AFTER YOU KNOW. "After we know what?" Twice

asks. I look at the stairs. The door at the top is still open. I can see the edge of the nearest table, the shadow of the nearest Mother. "After we know what we are," I say. "Now we find out what we're for." The key sits in Finger's palm. It doesn't burn like the brass one did. It simply waits, patient as the house, as the table, as the years of breakfasts we ate without asking questions. Hum's note changes again. Still minor, but resolving now. Moving toward something that might be an ending.

Chapter

Six

written by Sammy Hall

Finger closes her hand around the key and says, "The basement." We all look at her. "There's no basement," Twice says. "Yes there is." She's not guessing. She's known this whole time, maybe, or just figured it out in the same way I sometimes know which direction Mother will want us to face before she scatters the salt. Some things you understand sideways, through intuition instead of evidence. But I scan back through my stones of memory and can't find a basement door. Not in the kitchen. Not in any of the hallways that stretched and contracted through the nights. I've mapped this house in my head a hundred times during the sleepless hours. There's no door leading down. "The table," Marie says. She's already kneeling again, looking underneath. The rest of us crouch down to see what she's seeing. There, in the center where the wood is darkest, where the grain swirls into that pattern I could never trace to an ending: a handle. Flush with the underside, almost invisible. Carved from the same piece of wood so there's no seam, just a slight difference in the direction of the grain that suggests a separate piece. Twice reaches for it. Pulls. The center section of the table lifts. A trapdoor, circular, maybe three feet across. Underneath is darkness and stairs leading down. Wooden steps, steep, disappearing into black. "Of course," I say. "Of course the table is the door." The table that seated five generations. The table that stayed true while the house rearranged itself. It wasn't

anchored to the floor. It was the floor. Or the passage through it. The thing that connected all the levels we weren't supposed to see. Hum's note cuts off mid-phrase. He stands up and without discussing it, without any of us agreeing to a plan, he starts down the stairs. Just goes. Peter, the control group, the one who was kept pure and came out silent. Maybe he knows something we don't. Maybe he's just tired of waiting for permission that will never come in a form we can recognize. We follow because that's what we do. We're good at following. Mother trained that into us thoroughly, original and copies alike. The stairs are narrow. I have to turn sideways on the fourth step. My shoulder scrapes the wall, which is earth, packed hard, smelling like clay and old root systems. There's no light source I can identify but I can see anyway. Dim, gray, like the air itself is barely luminescent. Fifteen steps. I count them. Then the stairs end and we're in a room. It's small. Maybe ten feet by ten feet. The walls are lined with shelves and the shelves are full of jars. Glass jars with metal lids, the old-fashioned kind you use for canning. Each jar holds something floating in clear liquid. I move closer to the nearest shelf. Inside the first jar: a hand. Small. A child's hand. The proportions are wrong. Too many knuckles. "Oh no," Marie says behind me. The second jar holds an eye. Pale gray, trailing an optic nerve that drifts in the liquid like a white root. Third jar: a tooth. Just one. Adult-sized, not like the one that fell from Finger's envelope. I move down the line. More pieces. A kidney. A section of spine. Something that might be a larynx. The jars are labeled with dates and notation I don't understand. "S2-a, harvest 3, viability low." "S1, original sample, pre-iteration." "Control tissue, Peter variant, unused." "She took pieces," Twice says. His voice is flat. David's voice, maybe, the person he was before he became Twice. Before he died at the table and came back. "When we were sleeping. Or before we woke up the first time. She took pieces and that's how she made more." There's a workbench at the far end of the room. Surgical tools laid out in neat rows. Scalpels. Clamps. Things I don't have names for. And in the center of the bench, a book. Leather-bound, thick, the pages warped from moisture or age. Finger

walks to it. Fits the silver key into a lock on the book's cover I didn't notice until the key slid home. The lock opens. She lifts the cover. The first page has one sentence in Mother's shaking handwriting: "Instructions for the next Mother." Underneath, a list of names. Eight names. Our names. Our real names. And next to each name, a checkbox. Seven are checked. Only one remains empty. Peter.

Chapter

Seven

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One observes the empty checkbox with a peculiar species of understanding. The kind that arrives not through reason but through the body, the way one's hand knows to withdraw from flame before the mind has registered heat. Peter, standing nearest to the workbench, does not react. His silence now possesses a different quality than the silence he has maintained these many years. It is the silence of a thing waiting to be completed. "What does it mean?" Marie asks. Though one suspects she knows. We all know, in the way children know things adults believe they have successfully hidden. Finger turns the page. The instructions are methodical. Clinical. They detail the process by which one produces a copy: the tissue samples required, the incubation period, the feeding schedule during early development. Margin notes in different ink suggest modifications, improvements. "Iteration four retains too much memory. Reduce hippocampal tissue by half." "Vocal apparatus degrading. Consider supplementation." One finds oneself reading over her shoulder. The prose is matter-of-fact. It might be a recipe for preserving vegetables. The final page contains a passage marked "Essential Procedure." It reads: "Should the current Mother become unable to continue operations, the control subject must be harvested fully. He contains the purest genetic material. From his tissue, the next Mother shall be generated. The control subject will recognize

the time. His function is to offer himself." Twice looks at Peter. "No," he says. Simply that. But Peter has moved to the shelves. He examines the jars with the careful attention one might give to photographs of distant relatives. Picks up one labeled "Peter variant, neural sample, age six." Holds it to the light. Inside, something pale floats. A section of brain tissue, perhaps. The liquid preserves it in dreadful clarity. One wonders what memories that tissue held. What thoughts occurred in those cells before they were excised and suspended. "She has been taking pieces from me all along," Peter says. His voice, so rarely employed, carries a strange resonance in this underground room. "I wondered why I woke with headaches. Why there were mornings I could not account for." He sets the jar down with extraordinary gentleness. Turns to face us. "The book states I shall recognize the time," he continues. "I do recognize it. The current Mother is failing. You have seen the evidence yourselves. The multiplicity upstairs. The degradation. She is fragmenting." "You cannot simply volunteer for this," one finds oneself saying. The words emerge with more force than one intended. "You are not an ingredient. You are Peter." "I am the control group. That was always my purpose." Finger closes the book. The sound of the cover meeting the pages is decisive. Final. "No," she says. "We refuse." "You cannot refuse on my behalf." "We are refusing the entire premise." She picks up the book, carries it to the nearest shelf. Begins removing jars. "Marie, assist me." Marie understands immediately. She starts pulling down jars from the opposite shelf. The vessels are heavy. She cradles them carefully despite what they represent, despite what they contain. "What are you doing?" Twice asks. "Destroying the inventory," Finger says. "If there are no materials, there can be no procedure." One should perhaps object. These samples represent years of work, evidence of what was done to us. But one finds one's hands reaching for jars as well. The glass is cold. The liquid inside sloshes gently. We pile them on the workbench. Thirty jars. Forty. Fifty. Every piece of us that Mother thought to preserve. Peter watches. He does not help. He does not hinder. His expression suggests a man observing something from a great distance. "There shall be no next

Mother," Finger says. She picks up the leather book. "There shall be no more iterations." She places it atop the pile of jars. Marie produces from her cheek a box of matches. One had not realized she carried such a thing. But Marie keeps everything, always. "The liquid is formaldehyde," Twice observes. "It will burn." "Yes," Finger says. "It will." She strikes the match. The flame catches immediately, eager. She holds it for one moment, allowing us to understand what comes next. Then she drops it onto the book. The fire spreads faster than one anticipated. The formaldehyde ignites. The jars begin to crack from heat. Above us, through the open trapdoor, one hears a sound. Multiple footsteps. The Mothers, descending.

Chapter

Eight

written by Dario Selo

The footsteps possess a quality one might call synchronization, though that word fails to capture the horror of multiple bodies moving as a single mechanism. One counts eight distinct treads on the stairs. Eight Mothers, then, or perhaps our original Mother fragmented into the number she required. The number we represented. The flames climb. The heat presses against one's face with immediate intimacy. The jars crack in sequence (a sound like small bones breaking), and the liquid feeds the fire with blue-green intensity. One finds oneself thinking: we are burning the evidence of our own construction. We are refusing to be raw material. Peter moves past us toward the stairs. His intention is legible in his posture. He means to intercede, to offer himself as the book instructed, to fulfill the purpose for which he was kept pure. Twice catches his arm. "Let me go," Peter says. "Why would we do that?" "Because the alternative is worse. If there is no Mother, the house will, " He pauses. Searching for language adequate to whatever he knows and we do not. "The house will correct the absence. It will use what is available." The first Mother reaches the bottom step. She looks at the fire with an expression one cannot classify. Not anger. Not sorrow. Something mathematical. The face of someone watching an equation solve itself incorrectly. "You were not supposed to find the book," she says. Her voice is our Mother's voice, but underneath it one hears the

others. Eight voices speaking as one, slightly out of phase. "The book was for after." "After what?" Finger asks. Her hand has found Marie's. They stand together before the burning workbench like children expecting punishment, which is, one supposes, exactly what we are. "After I ended," Mother says. "After the house required new instruction." The other Mothers descend. They arrange themselves in a line. Seven identical women with wrong hands. Our Mother, multiplied. The space is too small for this many bodies. One can smell them. Formaldehyde and burnt sugar. The chemical sweetness Marie identified upstairs. "The control was meant to generate the replacement," Mother continues. She looks at Peter with something that might be tenderness in a creature capable of such feeling. "You were meant to continue the work. To become what I became." "What work?" one asks. The question emerges before one can reconsider its wisdom. Mother's attention shifts. Her eyes (pale gray, all eight pairs identical) focus on one's face. "Keeping you," she says. "Keeping you from disappearing. That is the work." "We never asked to be kept." "Sarah asked." Mother's hand lifts. Points at Finger. "The original Sarah. She was dying. Five years old and dying from something the doctors could not name. She asked me to make her again. So I learned how." The fire has spread to the shelves. The wood is old. It accepts the flame eagerly. Smoke fills the ceiling space. One's eyes water. "I made her again," Mother says. "And again. And again. Each time she degraded. Each time I refined the process. You are Sarah-two-a-three-b. You are eight iterations removed from the child who asked not to disappear." Finger's grip on Marie's hand tightens. One watches her knuckles pale. "I never asked you to do this," she says. "No. You forgot asking. That is what happens. The copies forget they were ever afraid." The ceiling beams groan. The fire has found the joists. Above us, the table (our table, the one that seated five generations) will be heating from below. One imagines the wood grain darkening. The long surface beginning to warp. Peter pulls free from Twice's grip. He walks to Mother. Stands before her. "I decline the function," he says. Mother tilts her head. The gesture

is bird-like. Predatory. "You cannot decline. You are the control." "I am Peter. And I choose to burn with the samples." He steps backward into the fire. One lunges for him. Twice lunges. But Marie is faster. She produces from her mouth the brass key (she kept it, even after it opened the drawer). Throws it. The metal catches Peter in the temple. He stumbles. Falls forward. Away from the flames. "We are leaving," Marie says. "All of us. Now." Mother does not move to stop us. None of the Mothers move. They simply stand in their line, watching the fire consume the workshop, the samples, the book of instructions. We climb toward the light.

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