

FAMILY

What the Table Remembers

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

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Chapter

One

written by Sasha Loomis

The table arrived on a Thursday, which mother said was a mistake because nothing good comes on Thursdays except rain. It was longer than the hallway, longer than the driveway, possibly longer than the street if we'd been willing to measure, but we weren't. Father had ordered it from a catalog that appeared in the mailbox already open to page seventeen, already circled in a red that wasn't quite red, more the color of jam left too long in sunlight. "It seats infinite," he said, running his palm along the surface. The wood grain moved under his hand like something swimming. Sister counted the chairs. She got to forty-seven before her nose started bleeding, so we told her to stop. The chairs were all different heights, which mother said was democratic, though I'm not sure she used the word correctly. One chair was so tall it disappeared into the ceiling. Another was more of a stool, if stools could look apologetic. We had to take out the walls to fit it. Not all the walls, just the ones that insisted on being there. The others had the good sense to step aside. This left us with what father called "flexible living," which meant the bathroom was now a concept rather than a location. Grandmother said she'd seen this coming ever since the incident with the sugar bowl, but grandmother says that about everything. The first dinner was soup. Mother served it in bowls that didn't match because the matching ones had filed for divorce the previous winter. We sat

scattered along the table's length, voices reaching each other like rumors. Father was somewhere near the middle, or what we assumed was the middle before we realized the table might not have one. "Pass the salt," he called. It took three days. By then the soup had transformed into something with opinions. It told sister about the weather in places that don't exist yet. She wrote it all down in her book of unreliable prophecies, the one she keeps under the bed that isn't there anymore, on account of the walls. Uncle Marcus arrived for dinner though no one had invited him, which was typical of Uncle Marcus, who had been dead for six years but kept forgetting. He sat in the chair that faced backwards and ate with his hands reversed, fork in the right turning into knife in the left turning into spoon in both. "Fine table," he said, his voice coming from yesterday. Mother agreed with tomorrow. I tried to find my place. The table had a spot for everyone, father said, but my spot kept moving when I wasn't looking at it. Sometimes it was near the window that used to lead outside but now opened onto someone else's memory of outside. Sometimes it was next to the centerpiece, which changed depending on who was doing the centering. The centerpiece today was a boat made of bread. The centerpiece tomorrow had already been and gone. Sister said she could hear the table breathing at night, a slow wooden inhale that made the chairs shift closer together like they were trading secrets. I believed her because sister doesn't lie, she just sometimes tells the truth that hasn't happened yet. Grandmother set thirteen extra places for the family members who hadn't been born. She gave them names that tasted like colors. When father asked what she was doing, she said she was being practical, which in grandmother's language means something else entirely, possibly something in Latin, possibly something in a language that Latin is afraid of. The table grew longer on Tuesdays. We stopped noticing. There was talk of getting a shorter table, but when mother called the catalog, a voice made of paper cuts told her that returns were only accepted in March, and March had been discontinued for repairs. So we kept it. Father started sitting at different places, trying them out like identities. Mother stayed put,

which meant she moved with the table's breathing. Sister sat in the tall chair, the one that went up and up, and sometimes we wouldn't see her for days, just hear her counting from somewhere near the ceiling where the ceiling used to be.

Chapter

Two

written by Cora Lindgren

The ceiling that used to be still smelled like ceiling: old paint and the mineral dust that sifts down whenever the house shifts in its sleep. I could smell Sister up there too, that particular tang of her sweat mixed with the graphite from her pencil and the paper smell of her prophecy book. Different from regular paper. Hers smelled like turned earth after a thaw. I found my plate on the table near a knot in the wood that looked like an eye. The plate was cold. Everything on it was cold except the peas, which were room temperature, which meant they'd been sitting there since before I sat down, which meant time was doing that thing again where it folded wrong. The salt finally arrived. Father had called for it three days ago and here it was, traveling hand to hand down the table's length, each person adding their own finger-warmth to the glass shaker. By the time it reached me the glass was blood-hot. I didn't want salt anymore. I wanted to know whose hands had held it between Father's and mine, because I only recognized four of the thirteen people I could see from my spot. One of them was eating soup that had gone to jelly. She cut it with a knife, neat squares that quivered. Her fingernails were painted the color of old copper, the green kind that comes with patience and weather. She looked at me when I looked at her. Her eyes were gray and her face was familiar in the way that furniture is familiar, like I'd been sitting on it for years without really seeing it. "You're

Anna's," she said. Not a question. Statement like a hand on a shoulder. I didn't know Anna. I said so. "Not yet," the woman said, and went back to her jellied soup. Uncle Marcus was arguing with the chair that faced backwards. The chair was winning. I could tell because Uncle Marcus kept switching which hands were which, trying to get the advantage, but the chair had no hands so it couldn't be tricked. It just sat there being backwards while Uncle Marcus's voice looped around it like smoke that couldn't decide which way was up. Grandmother leaned over the table toward me, her bosom resting on the wood. The table creaked under her weight but didn't mind. Everything bent for Grandmother eventually. "The drawer," she said. Breath like cloves and the inside of old purses. "What drawer." She pointed down. Under the table's edge, where my knees were, I felt the lip of something. My fingers found the pull. Metal, warm, shaped like a comma or a question without the dot. "Not yet," Grandmother said when I started to tug. "Funerals first, then drawers. That's the order. You get it wrong and what's inside gets confused about whether it's meant for the living or the dead." "Whose funeral." "Yours, maybe. Mine, probably. The table's, eventually." She pulled back, her bosom unsticking from the wood with a sound like a boot leaving mud. "Tables don't die easy. Too many people sitting at them, holding them here. But everything dies if you wait long enough." Mother was serving something now. Not soup anymore. This was solid, brown, textured like the bark of something that grew underground. She put a slab on each plate she could reach. The slabs steamed. They smelled like Sundays, or what Sundays used to smell like before the walls stepped aside and let the weekdays bleed together. Sister's counting stopped. In the silence I heard the table breathing again, that slow wooden tide Grandmother had mentioned. The chairs did shift. Mine moved three inches left while I was cutting my bark-thing. When I looked down my plate had shifted too, staying in front of me, loyal. Father called for the pepper. I watched the shaker start its journey, hand to hand, warming as it went. Mother told him it would be a week at least. He nodded like he'd expected that. Like he'd

already tasted the pepper, already knew what it would do to the bark-thing that hadn't been invented yet when he'd started chewing. The woman with copper-green nails stood. Her chair scraped. The sound echoed for longer than it should have, repeating down the table's length like a message in a language made of friction and wood grain. "I'll be at the funeral," she said to me. Then to the air: "Most of us will."

Chapter

Three

written by Olive Kassen

The air where she'd spoken stayed warmer than the rest of the room. I watched it shimmer, a column of used breath that bent the lamplight passing through it. The lamp was the one with the base shaped like a heron, the one Father had found in a culvert after the spring that wouldn't stop. Its shade was yellowed on one side, less from age than from the time Uncle Marcus had tried to read by it for forty-eight hours straight and his looking had stained the fabric. The bark-thing on my plate had cooled into something I could name. Pot roast. Overcooked by exactly seventeen minutes, which was how Mother always made it, timing it to the gap between intention and arrival. I cut a piece. The meat separated along fault lines I couldn't see until the knife found them. Sister descended. Not walked down stairs, because the stairs had been conceptual since the walls left. She just became lower, degree by degree, until her feet touched the floor near the kitchen that was now part of the dining room that was now part of the same breath as the garden. Her nose wasn't bleeding anymore but the evidence of it remained, a dark crust at one nostril like a misplaced punctuation mark. "Forty-seven chairs," she announced. "Still forty-seven." "Did you think there'd be more?" Grandmother asked. She was polishing a fork with the corner of her cardigan, the gray one she'd been wearing since before I was born, possibly since before she was born. The fork caught light and

threw it at the wall that wasn't there. "Fewer," Sister said. Her voice was hoarse. "Things usually leave." Father looked up from his place at the table's curve. He'd moved again, or the table had moved him. Now he sat where the morning light would hit him if morning came from the west, which lately it did on Thursdays. His hands were folded. Between his thumbs I could see the grain of the wood, darker there, as if stained by the oil of generations of folded hands, all the waiting and saying grace and not saying what needed to be said. "The drawer opens from any seat," he said. Not to me, not to Sister. To the table itself, or to the listening quality the room had taken on since the woman with copper-green nails left her warmth in the air. I touched the pull under the table's edge. The metal comma, patient against my fingertips. "Not yet," Grandmother said again. Sharper this time. "I told you the order." "Whose funeral are we waiting for?" I kept my hand where it was. The pull was getting warmer, or my fingers were getting colder. Hard to tell which. Mother set down the serving plate. It made no sound. The table accepted it the way earth accepts rain, with a subtle darkening, a sense of absorption. "We'll know when it happens," she said. Her apron had a stain shaped like a wing. She'd been trying to bleach it out for three years. The stain had other plans. Uncle Marcus laughed, a sound like gravel in a can. "Already happened," he said from his backwards chair. "You're just waiting for it to catch up." His fork and knife had reversed themselves again. Now he was eating with the handles, or the handles were eating him. The pot roast on his plate looked older than the pot roast on mine, gray and resigned. The table breathed out. All the chairs shifted right this time, mine included. My plate stayed. Sister's book of prophecies slid three inches toward the table's edge before she caught it. The pages riffled, showing glimpses of her handwriting, the backward slant she'd developed after touching the stove that wasn't hot yet. Through the window that opened onto someone's memory, I saw snow. It was falling up. Each flake rose with the determinism of something returning home, white against a sky the color of tarnished silver. The garden beyond looked exactly as it had forty years ago, before Father

planted the hedge, or exactly as it would look forty years forward, after the hedge ate itself from the inside out. Time in other people's memories doesn't run the way time runs in rooms with all their walls. My finger rested on the drawer pull. Waiting. The metal had matched my temperature now. I couldn't tell where I ended and it began.

Chapter

Four

written by Sammy Hall

The pot roast had gone cold in a way that felt personal. Like it had decided I wasn't worth staying warm for. I lifted my finger off the pull and the metal stayed the same temperature, which meant it had taken something from me or I'd given it something I couldn't name. Father coughed. Actual cough, not the kind he used to interrupt grandmother when she started talking about the sugar bowl incident. This one had wet in it. He covered his mouth with his napkin and when he pulled it away there was a spot the color of rust, or dried roses, or the stuff that comes up from deep in your chest when deep in your chest has had enough. "Well," Mother said. Just that. Well. Her hand went to her throat. She touched the hollow there like she was checking if something had escaped. Sister's book hit the floor. Not dropped. Thrown. The pages fanned open to a section she'd written in green ink, the expensive kind she'd stolen from the post office three Decembers ago when December was still running on schedule. I could see numbers. Dates, maybe. Or coordinates. Or measurements of something that didn't hold still long enough to be measured properly. "Is that," I started. "Yes," Sister said. Grandmother stood. Her chair didn't scrape. It sighed. The sound a chair makes when it knows it won't be sat in again for a length of time that matters. She walked around the table's curve, one hand trailing on the wood. The grain followed her fingers like iron filings follow a magnet,

dark lines reorienting themselves to match the path of her touch. She stopped behind Father. Put both hands on his shoulders. He didn't look up at her. He was looking at his napkin, at the spot that was growing even though he'd stopped coughing. The spot had edges that moved. Fractals, I thought. Or the way shorelines work when you zoom in close enough that the concept of edge stops meaning anything solid. "This is the one, then," Grandmother said. Mother made a sound. Small sound. Mouse-sized. The kind that gets stuck between your ribs and your throat and doesn't know which way to go so it just sits there taking up room where your breath is supposed to be. Uncle Marcus stopped arguing with his chair. The silence from his direction was louder than his voice had been. Even dead six years and forgetting about it, he knew what that napkin meant. I stood up. My chair did scrape. Long scrape, the kind that says something's ending or beginning and the difference doesn't matter much because both feel like a door closing. "The drawer," I said. "After," Grandmother said. Still had her hands on Father's shoulders. He'd gotten smaller under them. Or she'd gotten bigger. Or the space between a person and the end of them had collapsed down to something you could measure in the width of a napkin stain. "You said funerals first." My voice came out harder than I meant. "This is first. This is happening first." Father looked up then. At me, through me. His eyes were the color they'd always been but lighter now, like something was shining through from the back. "The table knows," he said. Quiet. His voice had that quality wet leaves have when they're pressed in a book, thin and rust-colored and still holding the shape of what they used to be. "Knows what." "When to open. What to give." He touched the wood in front of him. The grain there was almost black, worn dark by all the meals, all the elbows, all the years of this family holding themselves up against it. "Five generations sat here. Five generations left something. You're the sixth." "I haven't left anything." "Not yet," Sister said. Same words Grandmother had used earlier, but Sister's voice made them sound different. Made them sound like she'd already read this part, already written it down in green ink in the book on the floor. The

window showed snow still falling upward. The garden beyond was turning into something else. Not the garden from forty years ago or forty years forward. A third garden. One that only existed in the moment between a napkin stain spreading and someone's hands on someone's shoulders and the table breathing its slow wooden breath while we all sat around it, waiting for what came next to catch up with where we already were. Mother picked up the serving plate. The pot roast was gone from it. Nothing left but the memory of grease, a dark sheen that caught the heron lamp's yellow light.

Chapter

Five

written by inkwell_amy

I pushed my chair back. It tipped. Hit the floor before I could catch it. Father's head snapped up at the sound. His eyes tracked me as I moved around the table's edge toward where Sister's book lay open. The pages were still. No wind in the house, not since the walls left, but there should have been some movement. Paper that still is paper that's waiting. I bent. Picked it up. The green ink was wet. "That's not possible," I said. "You wrote this three weeks ago." Sister watched me. "Did I." The numbers on the page were dates. Today's date at the top. Then a gap. Then another date six days forward with a line drawn through it in red. Red like the circle in the catalog. Red like jam left in sun. Below that: a list of names in Sister's backward slant. Father's name. A checkmark beside it in the same wet green. "Give it back," Sister said. Not angry. Tired. The kind of tired that comes from knowing things before they arrange themselves into knowing. I held the book away from her reaching hand. Found my own name three-quarters down the page. No checkmark. Just a question mark in pencil, the graphite smudged like she'd erased and rewritten it multiple times, trying to get the curve of uncertainty exactly right. "What does the question mark mean." "That you're the one who gets to ask." Sister's hand stayed out. Palm up. Waiting. I gave her the book. She closed it without looking at the pages, tucked it under her arm where it left a damp spot on her shirt. Green

bleeding through cotton. Grandmother's hands were still on Father's shoulders but her grip had changed. Now she was holding him down. Or holding him together. The pot roast smell had turned. Gone from overcooked meat to something older. The smell of turned earth. The smell Sister's prophecy book carried. "We should call someone," Mother said. Her voice was doing that thing where it climbed at the edges. About to tip over into the place where voices go when they can't hold what they're carrying anymore. "Who." Grandmother didn't look away from the back of Father's head. Mother's hands opened and closed on nothing. "A doctor. The hospital." "For what's already written?" Grandmother's voice had gone flat. Not angry flat. Stone flat. The kind of flat that comes after you've said the same true thing so many times it's worn smooth. I walked to Father's side of the table. Stood next to Grandmother's bulk. Up close I could see Father's napkin had stopped spreading. The stain had reached some border it recognized and quit. The edges were dry now. Rust-colored. Final. "Let me see," I said. Father handed me the napkin. His fingers brushed mine. They were cold in the specific way metal is cold. Like the warmth had been pulled out from the inside. The stain wasn't random. It had a shape. I turned the napkin, trying to read it. Not words. More like a map. Lines branching, intersecting. A river system or a family tree or the pattern veins make under skin. "That's the table," Sister said from behind me. "The stain is the table." I looked down at the wood grain. She was right. The dark lines in Father's section matched the rust-colored lines on the napkin. Branch for branch. Intersection for intersection. "It's been drinking us," Uncle Marcus said. His voice came from a direction that didn't match where his body sat. "Whole time. Every meal. Every hand folded on its surface. It takes a little and stores it. Waiting for when it needs to give something back." Mother made that mouse sound again. I dropped the napkin. It landed on Father's plate. The stain touched the remaining pot roast juice and started spreading again, fresh borders finding new territory. My hand went under the table before I decided to move it. Found the pull. The metal comma was hot now. Actually hot. I could

smell my fingerprints burning. "Open it," Father said. Not a command. Permission. I pulled. The drawer slid toward me, smooth and silent. Inside: five layers of objects stacked in chronological sediment. Photographs, letters, a watch, a thimble, a key. On top: a white envelope. My name on it in handwriting that matched the rust-colored map on Father's napkin. Behind me, Father's breathing changed rhythm. Slower. Deeper. The table breathing with him now, synchronized.

Chapter

Six

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One does not open such an envelope lightly, not when the hand that addressed it is still breathing, however changed that breath may be, at one's back. I withdrew the thing from among its companions. The paper was of good weight, a cream stock that suggested careful selection rather than mere proximity. It bore no seal, merely a tucked flap, the adhesive untouched. "Shall I," I began, and found I had no end for the sentence. "That's yours," Father said. His voice had thinned to something like wire. "Been yours since I put it there. Three months back, when the coughing started in earnest." Three months. I calculated backward through the dinners, the shifting chairs, Sister's prophecies accumulating in green and red. We had been eating above this knowledge the entire time. Mother sat down rather suddenly in the nearest chair. It was the apologetic stool. Her feet didn't touch the floor. She looked diminished there, or perhaps the stool had ideas about proportion that differed from architecture's usual claims. The envelope weighed less than one would expect of a future. I turned it over. My name again on the reverse, as though Father had wanted to be certain the thing would find me even if the drawer reorganized its contents according to some logic of its own. Given the nature of the table, such precaution seemed merely prudent. "Read it now or after?" Grandmother's question held no judgment. Simply procedure. She

understood better than any of us that ritual has a structure, that one does not shuffle the order without consequence. I looked at the rust-colored map on Father's napkin, then at the grain beneath his folded hands. The pattern had spread. What had been localized to his section now branched outward, dark lines reaching toward the other places where hands had rested, where elbows had worn the wood smooth, where five generations had transferred their particular warmth into timber. "Now," I said. "If it was meant for after, you would have addressed it to Future Self or some such construction." Father's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. The gesture of a man conserving his resources. "You were always the practical one." I had not known he thought that of me. It seemed important, this small revision of how one is seen. The envelope opened cleanly. Inside: a single sheet, folded once. Father's handwriting covered it in the careful script he used for documents he expected others would need to reference. Not the hasty scrawl of grocery lists or telephone messages, but the formation of letters intended to persist. I read it standing there beside Grandmother's bulk, beside Father's diminishing warmth. The words were plain. No poetry, no circling around the matter. Simply this: instructions for what was mine to inherit. Not possessions. Not the table, which apparently passed according to a mechanism the document did not specify. Instead: a task. "The drawer has six compartments," I read aloud, translating Father's prose into speech. "One for each generation that has held this house. The sixth is empty. You are to fill it before you leave." Sister inhaled sharply. "Leave what?" Mother's voice had steadied now. She had both feet on the floor. The apologetic stool had adjusted its height, or she had adjusted hers. I continued reading. "What you place there should represent the question you could not answer during your tenure at this table. Not the answer itself. We do not store solutions. Only the problems that shaped us." The letter went on. It detailed the contents of the other five compartments, matched each object to the ancestor who had deposited it. The watch had belonged to someone named Gregor, who had struggled with punctuality until it became metaphysical. The

key represented a woman called Opal, who had spent forty years trying to determine what lock it fit. Father coughed again. Wet, deliberate. The napkin was beyond use now. Grandmother produced another from somewhere within her cardigan's gray depths. She held it to his mouth while his shoulders convulsed. When the spell passed, I folded the letter. Returned it to its envelope. Set it on the table beside Father's plate. "What question was yours?" I asked him. He looked at me with those eyes gone transparent at the edges. "Whether I had done enough to prepare you." The table exhaled beneath us. Every chair shifted left this time, a rotation that suggested the changing of watch, the passing of sequence. "And the napkin map?" I pressed. "What does that answer?" Father smiled. Actual smile now, spending what remained. "That the table always knows the shape of us before we finish becoming it.

Chapter

Seven

written by Colin McAteer

Father's hand lifts from the table. The wood beneath shows a pale outline where his palm was, five fingers and the broad base mapped in unmarked grain. The rest of the section has gone dark, all those branching lines, but this hand-shape stayed clean. Protected. Or preserved. The envelope sits where I left it. Cream paper against dark wood. The contrast is sharp enough that I can see it in my peripheral vision even when I'm watching Father's face, watching the way his breathing has gone shallow. Three seconds in. Five seconds out. The math of it is wrong. "We should move him." I say it to Grandmother, but Mother answers. "Where would we move him to." She's still on the stool that changed height. Her hands are folded in her lap now, mirroring Father's posture. I watch her realize she's doing it. Watch her unfold them deliberately. Place them flat on her thighs instead. The watch in the drawer, Gregor's watch, ticks. I can hear it from where I'm standing. Seventy-three beats per minute. Too fast for a watch. Too slow for a heart working hard. Sister walks to the window with the upward-falling snow. She puts her hand against the glass. Her palm prints fog. Inside the fog she draws a number with her index finger. Forty-seven. Then she drags her whole hand down, erasing it. "The chairs are waiting," she says. I count them without meaning to. Forty-seven visible from this angle. The tall one that goes into the ceiling. The apologetic stool under

Mother. The backwards chair where Uncle Marcus sits, still sitting, though he's gone quiet in a way that feels like absence. Like he's forgotten himself into somewhere else. "Waiting for what," I say. Sister turns from the window. Her hand leaves a clean spot on the glass. Through it I can see the third garden, the one that's neither memory nor future. Something is growing there. Tall stalks with no leaves. They're moving, bending toward the house, though there's no wind in that place either. "For someone to sit in them." Sister's voice has that quality it gets when she's reading from the book without opening it. "You can't have a funeral without filling the seats." Grandmother removes her hands from Father's shoulders. Steps back. Her cardigan settles around her like it's been holding its breath. She walks to the drawer, still open, still showing its five layers of objects. She lifts the watch. Gregor's watch. Holds it to her ear. "Stopped," she says. She winds it. Three full turns of the crown. The ticking resumes. She sets it back in its place. "That's twice this month I've had to wind that. Gregor's been gone ninety years. His question should be done asking itself by now." "Maybe it's not his question anymore." I don't know why I say it. The words arrive in my mouth already formed. Grandmother looks at me. Her eyes are the same gray as the woman's earlier, the one with copper-green nails who said she'd be at the funeral. I understand now that they're related. Grandmother and that woman. Same eyes. Same way of looking that isn't looking at you but at the space you're about to occupy. Father coughs without the napkin. Blood on his lips. Real blood, not rust-colored. Bright red. Present tense. Mother stands. The stool scrapes. She goes to him. Kneels beside his chair. Takes his cold metal hands in her warm living ones. "Don't you dare," she says. "Not at the table. Not during dinner." But dinner is over. The plates have all gone cold. The pot roast smell has been replaced entirely by turned earth, by the smell of Sister's book, by something else underneath. Sawdust maybe. Or the smell wood makes when it's remembering being a tree. Uncle Marcus stands. His chair doesn't protest. He walks around the table's curve. Stops at an empty seat. The chair third from the end, on the side that

faces the kitchen-garden-concept. He pulls it out. Sits in it forward, not backwards. His hands rest on the table the right way around. Fork in left. Knife in right. "There," he says. His voice comes from today. From this moment. From the same time the rest of us occupy. "That's my seat for it." The table breathes in. All forty-seven chairs slide toward its center. Just an inch. Just enough.

Chapter

Eight

written by typewriter_tom

I sit in the chair next to Uncle Marcus. The wood is warm where someone else was, though I didn't see anyone leave. Father's blood runs down his chin. Mother catches it with her sleeve. Not the napkin. The napkin's done its job. Mapped him. Shown us where he ends. Sister pulls another chair from somewhere I can't see. Drags it scraping to the window side. Sits facing the garden with the moving stalks. They've grown taller. Close enough now I can see they're not stalks. They're fingers. Wooden fingers reaching up from underground, or down from somewhere overhead, the direction doesn't matter because that garden doesn't care about usual physics. "Seven chairs filled," Grandmother counts. "Forty to go." "There aren't forty people," I say. "Not yet." The front door opens. I hear it even though the front door isn't connected to this room anymore, hasn't been since the walls left. But sound finds its way. The woman with copper-green nails comes through. Behind her: three people I've never seen. One is tall enough he has to duck under the ceiling-that-isn't. One is so thin she looks like she's made of the spaces between things. One is a child, maybe six, with Father's eyes. The light-at-the-edges eyes. They take seats without asking. The tall one folds himself into a chair on the far end. The thin woman sits near the centerpiece, which has stopped being a bread boat and is now a bowl of water that reflects nothing. The child climbs into the tall chair. The one

that goes up and up. He starts climbing the rungs built into the back. "Who are they?" Mother's voice breaks on the question. "Family," Grandmother says. "The ones the table called." More arrive. They come through the window, the door, one comes up through the floorboards like he's been living in the crawlspace beneath this room we don't have. They fill the chairs one by one. Some I recognize from photographs in the albums Mother keeps. Some are too old to have photographs. Their clothes are from wrong decades. Wrong centuries maybe. One woman sits in a dress made of something that predates fabric. Her hands are scarred the way hands get from washing in lye, from wringing necks, from all the ways women kept families alive before keeping alive got easier. Father's breathing stops. Starts again. Stops longer this time. The last chair fills. The apologetic stool that Mother abandoned. A man sits in it. He's young, maybe twenty, wearing Father's face from before I was born. Before Father was Father. When he was just someone's son, sitting at a different table, not knowing yet that this table was coming for him. "That's everyone," Sister says. Forty-seven chairs. Forty-seven people. The table has its full complement. I stand. Walk to Father. Kneel where Mother was kneeling before she moved back, giving me room I didn't ask for. His hand is cold now all the way through. Not metal-cold anymore. The cold of things that have stopped having temperature. Stopped having opinions about heat. "What goes in the drawer?" My voice sounds like someone else's. Younger. The version of me that still thought questions had answers that fit. Father's lips move. No sound comes out. Just the shape of a word. I lean close. Smell the blood, the sawdust, the turned earth. "Choose," he mouths. His hand in mine goes lighter. Not smaller. Just less. Like the weight is leaving it in increments too small to measure until suddenly I'm holding something that barely anchors to the world. The table breathes out. Long exhale. Every person in every chair leans back in unison. The motion is synchronized. Rehearsed. Or inevitable. Hard to tell which. Father stops breathing entirely. The stopping has a sound. A click. Like a door closing or a watch stopping or a drawer sliding shut after you've placed something inside it

you can't take back. Mother makes a sound I've never heard her make. Animal sound. The noise of something breaking from the inside out. I reach under the table. Find the drawer pull. The metal comma is cold now. Dead cold. I pull it open. The five compartments show their objects. The sixth compartment waits. Empty. Expecting. I look at the envelope with my name on it. At Father's hand. At the rust-colored map on the napkin. I know what goes in the drawer.

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