

HORROR

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU COUNT PAST SEVENTEEN

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

ONE

wordsbylena

TWO

rpenguin

THREE

Sammy Hall

FOUR

Dan Okafor

FIVE

Colin McAteer

SIX

Iris Beddoe

SEVEN

Margot Vail

EIGHT

inkwell_amy

Chapter

ONE

written by wordsbylena

The house contains seventeen windows. I have counted them four times, once from each cardinal direction, and the number holds. Nine on the south face. Five on the north. Two on the east. One on the west. Seventeen total. The proportions trouble me. Houses prefer even numbers, symmetrical distributions. This one refuses. I am the third occupant in eleven days. The Agency has documented this. They provided me with a manila folder, thickness: one and three-eighths inches, weight: 1.4 pounds. Inside: forty-seven pages of incident reports, twelve photographs (three show nothing, four show blurs, five show what might be furniture rearranged), and one handwritten note that says only "Count everything." The first occupant lasted ninety-six hours. The second: thirty-one. I have been here for six hours and twenty-two minutes. I am counting. The front door requires seven seconds to close completely. I have timed it. Push it shut, and it drifts those final two inches at a rate I can measure with my pulse: eight beats, but seven seconds because my heart runs fast, has always run fast, which is why I count other things to slow it down. The door's hinges are new. Recently installed. The screw holes in the frame reveal previous hinges, three sets of them, each mounted half an inch higher than the last, as if the door has been slowly climbing the frame. In the kitchen: four chairs around a table meant for six. Two place settings laid out, unused, the plates white

and perfectly centered on woven mats. I measured the distance from plate-edge to mat-edge: 1.75 inches on all sides, exact. No one sits this precisely by accident. In the refrigerator: six eggs (I cracked one to be sure; it was an egg), one gallon of milk dated nine days from now, three apples in a bowl on the second shelf. The apples have no bruises. Their stems point in the same direction, magnetic north, which I verified with the compass I carry. The Agency's instructions contained forty-three discrete directives. Among them: document all sounds, maintain written logs at four-hour intervals, photograph any changes to the environment, do not enter the basement after sunset, do not answer the telephone before checking the caller list, do not open mail addressed to previous occupants. Twelve of the instructions begin with "do not." The others begin with "you must." The division interests me: forty-three total, twelve prohibitions, thirty-one obligations. A prime number bracketed by composites. On the second floor, the bathroom mirror has no reflection in a circle approximately eight inches in diameter, centered two feet from the left edge. I spent eleven minutes verifying this. My face appears everywhere except in that space, which shows only the white tile behind me. I placed objects in front of it: my hand, a towel, the soap dispenser. All vanish in the circle. All reappear outside it. I have photographed this. The camera confirms it. The basement door has three locks, keyholes facing outward, toward me, suggesting they secure something down there rather than prevent entry from above. Unless the locks were installed backward. Unless someone inside the basement locked themselves in and forgot which side was which. The Agency provided seven keys. I have tested five. None fit these locks. At sunset (5:47 PM, I watched it), the seventeen windows go dark in sequence, west to east, each one dimming exactly four seconds after the previous one. This takes one minute and eight seconds total. I stood in the living room and counted them. When the last window darkened, the telephone rang: eleven rings, then silence. The caller ID displayed only zeroes. The instruction said not to answer before checking. I checked. I did not answer. It is now 11:53 PM. In seven minutes, if the pattern holds,

something will happen. The previous occupants both noted disturbances at midnight. Both fled shortly after. I am stationed in the kitchen with my notebook, my watch, my camera, the folder. I have counted my breaths this last hour: one thousand and forty-seven. Too many. My heart is running fast again. The seventeenth window, the one on the west face, has just gone bright.

Chapter

TWO

written by rpenguin

Blevins was the enemy!

Chapter

THREE

written by Sammy Hall

I don't know who Blevins is. That's the first thing that runs through my head when I read what the second occupant wrote. Just those four words, scrawled at the bottom of page forty-eight like someone carved them into the paper with their pen. The Agency didn't mention a Blevins in the briefing. I flip back through the folder, scanning names in the incident reports. Mackey, the first occupant. Dr. Sarah Chen, the psychologist who assessed the house before anyone moved in. Agent Riggs, who delivered my instructions. No Blevins anywhere. But here's the thing. The second occupant, guy named Paul Taverner according to his intake form, he only made it thirty-one hours. And he spent some portion of that time writing this message, pressing hard enough that the exclamation point tore through to page forty-nine. So either Blevins mattered a lot, or Taverner had gone somewhere in his head where things that don't exist start mattering. Both possibilities bother me about equally. The seventeenth window is still bright. Not glowing, exactly. More like it's refusing to participate in nighttime the way the other sixteen are. I approach it, the one on the west face, and I'm counting my steps because that's what I do, that's how I keep the panic down where it belongs. Fourteen steps from the kitchen doorway. The window looks out onto the backyard, which I surveyed earlier: eleven trees, one shed, zero reasons for light to be hitting this particular

window at midnight. I check my watch. 11:54 PM. Outside, I can see my reflection in the glass. Just me, my face doing that thing it does when I'm trying to figure out a problem, eyebrows pulled together, mouth tight. And behind my reflection, the room is visible, the furniture exactly where I catalogued it earlier. But there's something off about the proportions. The couch behind me looks too far away in the glass, like the reflection is showing a deeper room than the one I'm standing in. I turn around to check. The couch is eight feet from where I'm standing. I measured it this afternoon. I look back at the window. In the reflection, it's got to be twelve, maybe fifteen feet. My pulse is doing its thing, climbing into the nineties probably, maybe higher. I press my hand against the glass. Cold, like windows are supposed to be in October. My reflection's hand meets mine. Except it doesn't quite. There's a gap, maybe a quarter inch, between where I feel the glass and where the reflection's hand appears to touch it. I spread my fingers. The reflection spreads its fingers. I pull my hand back slowly. The reflection's hand stays on the glass. I'm going to be professional about this. I'm going to take out my camera and document what I'm seeing, because that's directive number three: photograph any changes to the environment. But my hands are shaking enough that I have to grip the camera with both palms to keep it steady. Through the viewfinder, the window looks normal. My reflection doing exactly what I'm doing. No gaps. No impossible distances. I lower the camera. The hand is back. My hand, but not mine, pressed against the glass from inside the reflection. 11:56 PM. Blevins was the enemy. Okay. Fine. So who was Blevins the enemy of? The house? The Agency? Taverner himself? And more importantly, where is Blevins now? Because I'm starting to think that maybe Blevins is what happens when you stay past thirty-one hours. Maybe Blevins is hour thirty-two and beyond. Maybe Blevins is what the third occupant becomes. The hand in the window spreads its fingers wider, then curls them slowly, like it's beckoning. I step back. Fifteen steps to the kitchen doorway. I don't take my eyes off the glass.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Dan Okafor

I make it back to the kitchen and sit down harder than I intend to. The chair scrapes loud against the linoleum. My notebook is where I left it, open to the page where I've been logging everything in my cramped handwriting. The pen is next to it. Standard Agency-issue ballpoint, navy blue casing, retractable tip. I pick it up and my hand is still doing the tremor thing, so the first three words come out looking like a seismograph. 11:57 PM. Reflection in west window exhibits autonomous movement. That sounds appropriately clinical. That sounds like something Agent Riggs could file in a folder for the fourth occupant to read, assuming there is one. Which there won't be if I make it past ninety-six hours, because that's the implicit promise here, isn't it? Last long enough and you get to leave. Last long enough and somebody else doesn't have to come count the windows. I close the notebook. I open it again. At the bottom of Taverner's message about Blevins, there's something I missed before. Not writing, exactly. An impression in the paper, like he started to write something else and then stopped. Pressed the pen down, dragged it maybe a sixteenth of an inch, then nothing. I tilt the page to catch the light from overhead. The angle helps. I can just make out what might be the top curve of a letter. Could be a C. Could be an O. Could be nothing, because I've been here six hours and forty-three minutes and I'm already looking for patterns that aren't there. The

refrigerator hums. It's been humming this whole time, but now I'm noticing it, which means my brain is trying to find something normal to land on. The hum is steady. Sixty cycles per second, probably, same as the electrical grid. I don't need to count this one. Some things you can just let be. Except the hum cuts out. Not like the power died. The kitchen light stays on, the clock on the microwave still reads 11:58. But the refrigerator goes silent in a way that makes the room feel larger, like the walls just took a step back. I stand up. The folder is still on the table, and I flip it open to the photographs the Agency provided. Twelve total. I've looked at them maybe six times since I got here, but I pull them out again and spread them across the table in the order they were filed. The three that show nothing: blank walls, empty corners, a hallway that could be anywhere. The four blurs: something dark and vertical in a doorway, something pale near the ceiling, something that might be a person if you want it to be. And then the five that show furniture rearranged. I line those five up. They're all the same room, the living room I walked through to get to the kitchen. In the first photo, the couch is against the south wall. Second photo, it's rotated ninety degrees. Third, it's against the west wall, under the seventeenth window. Fourth, it's back where it started. Fifth, it's gone entirely. The date stamps on the photos span six days. The couch moved five times in less than a week. I walk back to the doorway, the one that opens into the living room, and I look at the couch. It's against the east wall, which isn't a position I've seen in any of the photographs. I documented its location when I arrived: east wall, 14.5 inches from the corner, centered under the smoke detector. I have this written down. I measured it. 11:59 PM. The seventeenth window is still bright, and now I can see into the living room from where I'm standing, and the couch in the window's reflection is exactly where it should be. East wall. 14.5 inches from the corner. But the actual couch, the one I'm looking at with my actual eyes, is against the south wall now. I didn't hear it move. I've been in the kitchen for two minutes, maybe three, and the couch weighs at least seventy pounds and the floor in there is hardwood that creaks when you breathe on it

wrong. Midnight hits. My watch beeps once, a thin digital chirp. The telephone rings. Eleven times, same as before. I watch the caller ID. All zeroes. On the seventh ring, someone downstairs unlocks a door.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Colin McAteer

The sound comes up through the floorboards under my left foot. A bolt sliding metal-on-metal, then a second bolt, higher pitched, then the rattle of a chain being gathered up in someone's hands. Three locks, same as I counted on the basement door this afternoon. They are opening from the inside. I am still in the kitchen doorway. The telephone is on the wall to my right, cord coiled tight against the plaster, receiver jumping slightly with each ring. Eight. Nine. The ringing stops at eleven, same count as before, and in the silence that follows I hear footsteps on stairs. Not loud. The weight of them is wrong for an adult, too light, or else someone is walking on the edges of their feet to distribute the pressure. I know how to do this. I have done this. You walk on the outside of your sole when you do not want to be heard. The footsteps stop. The basement door is fifteen feet from where I stand, around the corner in the hall that leads to the front of the house. I cannot see it from here. I did not hear it open. My instructions said not to enter the basement after sunset. They did not say what to do if the basement enters me. If the basement comes up. I move to the table and pick up my camera. The strap goes around my neck. My hands have stopped shaking, which is either very good or very bad, I cannot tell which. When the panic gets high enough, my body sometimes goes calm, decides the fear is wasting resources, shuts it down to preserve what is left. This has

happened twice before. Once in a house in Maryland. Once in my apartment when I was twenty-three and someone was trying to open my door at four in the morning. Both times I survived by going still. I go still now. The hallway is dark. I did not turn those lights off. I left every light on when I arrived because the instructions did not say to conserve power and I do not like dark spaces in buildings I do not know. But the hallway is dark now anyway, and something is standing in it. Not standing. Sitting. Low to the ground. I raise the camera. Through the viewfinder I can make out a shape, maybe four feet tall, on the third step up from the hall floor. The stairs lead to the second story. This shape is between me and the only exit I have confirmed. The front door is past it. The back door is in the kitchen behind me, but I checked it twice and it has been nailed shut, the nails driven in from outside, which made no sense until now. I take the photo. The flash goes off. The shape does not move. The shape is a child in a yellow raincoat, hood up, hands folded in its lap. Rubber boots. Small ones, sized for someone maybe seven years old. I lower the camera. The child is still there, exactly as the photo showed. The raincoat has a duck pattern on it, rows of yellow ducks with orange beaks. The boots are red. I wait for it to speak. Children in houses like this always speak. They ask questions or give warnings or say things that do not make sense until later. This one does not speak. It tilts its head, and the motion is smooth, too smooth, like something is moving it from above the way you tilt a cup. The hood stays up. I cannot see a face. Behind me, in the living room, the couch scrapes across the floor. Long slow drag, wood on wood, and when it stops I know without looking that it is back under the seventeenth window. The bright one. The one with my hand still pressed against the glass. The child stands. It holds out one hand, palm up, and even from here I can see there is something in it. Small. Dark. Rectangular. A key. The child descends one step. Its boots make no sound. I have seven keys in my pocket. The Agency gave them to me. I tested five on the basement locks. None of them fit. This is the sixth. The child takes another step down.

Chapter

SIX

written by Iris Beddoe

I don't take the key. That's the first decision that matters. The child in the yellow raincoat stands on the second step, palm open, and I make my body a stone. The key sits in its hand like an accusation. My camera is still raised. I take another photo. The flash whites out the hallway, catches the duck pattern on the raincoat mid-glare. In the viewfinder's preview screen: empty stairs. No child. No boots. Just the third step with its chipped paint and the bannister I catalogued at 3 PM. I lower the camera. The child is still there. Fine. I move sideways, keeping my back to the kitchen wall. Six feet between me and the table. The folder is there. I need the folder. If I'm going to understand Blevins, if I'm going to understand why Taverner only made it thirty-one hours, the answer is in those incident reports. Has to be. The child watches me. I think it's watching. The hood shadows everything. I reach the table. My hand finds the folder's edge. Behind me, the back door rattles in its frame, the nails holding it shut groaning like teeth. "Blevins," I say. Testing the name. The child's head snaps upright. Too fast. The movement a puppet master would make if they forgot to ease the string. So. Blevins means something. I pull the folder toward me, flip it open to the incident reports. Mackey's report is first, four pages of neat typed observations. I scan for the name. Nothing. Chen's psychological assessment, three pages. Nothing. I'm halfway through Riggs's intake documentation

when I see it. Not Blevins. Blevinson. Handwritten in the margin next to a date. March 1974. No context. Just the name and the date, underlined twice. I look up. The child is on the bottom step now. It hasn't walked. It's simply progressed, the way film progresses when you skip frames. Boot to floor. Silent. The key is still in its palm. I flip to the photographs. The five with furniture rearranged, I spread them out again, and this time I'm not looking at the couch. I'm looking at the corners, the baseboards, the negative spaces. There. In the third photograph. The one where the couch is under the seventeenth window. There's a shape in the lower right corner, mostly cropped out. Small. Yellow. I hold the photograph closer to the overhead light. A raincoat sleeve. Child-sized. Just the cuff and two fingers visible at the frame's edge. Someone took this photo while the child was in the room. My heart isn't racing anymore. It's drumming, steady and cold. The kind of rhythm that means my body has made a choice without consulting me. I set the photograph down. "Where's Blevinson?" I ask. The child raises its other hand. Points. Down. Basement. Of course. The locks on the basement door were installed backward. Keyholes facing out. I thought it meant something was locked in. But if the locks open from the inside, if someone down there has the keys, then the locks were never meant to keep something in. They were meant to keep someone out. I think about Mackey, ninety-six hours. I think about Taverner, thirty-one. Both of them fled. Both of them documented disturbances at midnight. Neither of them went into the basement. The child takes a step toward me. One step. I can see under the hood now. Not a face. A surface. Smooth. Pale. The shape of a face the way water holds the shape of what contains it. It extends the key further. My instructions said not to enter the basement after sunset. Sunset was 5:47 PM. It is now 12:04 AM. Technically morning. Technically a new day. The Agency is careful with language. I take the key. The child's hand closes around mine, and its skin is cloth. Raincoat material. There is no hand inside the glove. It leads me into the hallway, toward the basement door I cannot see. Behind us, the

seventeenth window goes dark. All at once. Like something has finally come inside.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by Margot Vail

The child's grip tightens. I count the pressure points: four. One for each finger that isn't there. The basement door is oak. I catalogued it at 14:22 this afternoon: seven feet tall, thirty-two inches wide, three hinges of tarnished brass. The wood has a grain that runs vertical, interrupted by a knot at eye level that looks like a mouth. I noted this. I note everything. It's why the Agency keeps sending me. The child releases my hand. It stands beside the door, waiting. I insert the key. The first lock turns with a click that sounds like a joint popping. I remove the key, insert it in the second lock. Same sound. The third lock is lower, positioned where a child would reach it naturally. I have to crouch. The door swings inward without my touching it. Stairs descend into absolute dark. Not dim. Not shadow. The kind of dark that has mass. I count thirteen steps before the darkness makes counting impossible. My camera is still around my neck. I raise it, set the flash to maximum output, and take a photo straight down. The flash fires. For one-eighth of a second I see: twenty-seven steps, not thirteen. A concrete floor. A figure at the bottom, facing away. The afterimage burns my retinas. I check the preview screen. Empty stairs. Concrete floor. Nothing else. I lower the camera. The child in the raincoat brushes past me, starts down. Its boots make contact this time. Soft taps, regular, metronomic. I count them. Twelve taps. Then silence. The Agency's instructions contained forty-three directives. I have

broken one. The question is whether the prohibition against entering after sunset was protective or predictive. Whether it was meant to keep me safe or keep me from finding what I'm about to find. I descend. The stairs are wood, not concrete. Each step flexes slightly under my weight. At the ninth step, my hand finds a railing I didn't see. Cold metal. Recently installed, like the hinges on the front door. I grip it and continue. Eighteen steps total. I reach the bottom and my foot hits concrete. A pull-chain hangs in front of my face. I know this without seeing it. My forehead brushes it in the dark. I pull. Fluorescent lights stutter on. Four tubes, ceiling-mounted, forty watts each. The basement is smaller than the house's footprint. Twelve feet by fourteen. The walls are cinder block, painted white, no windows. A workbench runs along the north wall. On it: three telephones in a row, each one rotary dial, each one beige. A filing cabinet stands in the corner, dented, four drawers. The child is gone. I approach the telephones. The first one has a tag wired to its cord. Handwritten in blue ink: MACKEY. The second: TAVERNER. The third tag is blank. I pick up the receiver on the first phone. Dial tone. I check the rotary dial. The finger holes are labeled, but not with numbers. With letters. R. I. G. G. S. And three others I don't recognize. I set it down. The filing cabinet is unlocked. I open the top drawer. Inside: folders. Yellow, not manila. Twenty-three of them, each labeled with a name. I flip through. Mackey. Taverner. Chen. Riggs. And others. Nineteen names I don't know. I pull the Taverner file. Inside: his incident report, typed. But beneath it, another document. Handwritten. His handwriting, I recognize it from the journal entry upstairs. It reads: Blevins was the enemy because Blevins refused to stay in sequence. Occupant four will understand. Occupant four has already been here. I am occupant three. I set the file on the workbench. My hand is steady now. The fear has burned down to something useful. The bottom drawer of the cabinet is twice as deep as the others. I pull it open. A raincoat. Yellow. Duck pattern. Folded neatly. Red boots beside it, paired, toes pointing toward me. Beneath the coat: a logbook. Leather-bound, water-stained. I open it to the first page. At the top, in typed text:

BLEVINSON HOUSE, OPERATIONAL LOG, MARCH 1974 TO PRESENT.
Below that, entries. Dates, times, observations. The handwriting changes every few pages. Different occupants. Different hands. I count backward through the entries. Twenty-seven occupants before Mackey. I am occupant thirty. The most recent entry is dated today, 19:34. My handwriting. Words I didn't write: Counted seventeen windows. Forgot to count the one in the basement. I look up. The wall behind the workbench has a window. Small, square, glass painted black from the other side. Something is pressed against it, looking in.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by inkwell_amy

I drop the logbook. It hits concrete with a slap. The painted glass shows me nothing except black and the faint outline of my own face reflected back. But the reflection is closer than I am to the window. Six inches between us. I close that distance in two steps. My nose almost touches the glass. The reflection stays where it was. I press my palm flat against the pane. The paint is old, flaking under my touch. Small chips stick to my skin. Through them I can see dirt. Packed earth on the other side. This window doesn't open to outside. It opens to in. I scrape more paint away with my thumbnail. Long vertical stroke. The patch of dirt I've exposed shifts. Something pale moves behind it. Fingers. Pushing through soil like it's water. I step back. The fingers keep coming. They find the glass, press against the cleared section. The nails are clean. Recently trimmed. I know these hands. I've been watching them hold a pen, turn pages, check my watch for nine hours and eighteen minutes. The window isn't locked. I can see the latch, simple brass, turned horizontal. My hand reaches for it before I decide to move. I stop halfway. Behind me, the stairs creak. I turn. The child stands on the third step up, hood pushed back now. Where its face should be: smooth white plaster. A cast. The kind you'd make for a death mask, except there are no features. No eyes, no nose, no mouth. Just the suggestion of them, shallow depressions in the surface. It raises one hand. Points at the

window. Then at me. Then at the filing cabinet. I understand. I open the second drawer. More files. I find mine near the back. Thicker than Taverner's. I pull it out, spread it on the workbench beside the telephones. The first page is my Agency intake form. Photo stapled to the corner: me at twenty-nine, hair shorter, jaw tighter. Beside my photo, another image. Paper-clipped, not stapled. Same angle, same background. Different face. Older. Harder. But wearing my clothes. My watch. My expression. The date stamp reads March 1974. Below the photos: a typed assessment. OCCUPANT 30 (PRIMARY DESIGNATION). OCCUPANT 4 (RECURSIVE INSTANCE). STATUS: OVERLAPPING. I flip to the next page. Medical records. Blood type, dental history, vaccination dates. All accurate. All mine. Beneath them: incident reports. Twenty-six of them. Each one documenting my time in the Blevinson house. Different dates. Different outcomes. In five reports I lasted past ninety-six hours. In eighteen I left before midnight on the first day. In three I didn't leave at all. The child descends another step. The fingers behind the window have stopped moving. They're just resting there now, patient, waiting for me to open the latch. I pick up the third telephone. The one with the blank tag. I dial zero. On the first ring, the window starts to open. Not the latch moving. The frame itself separating from the wall, pulling inward, dirt spilling through the gap onto the concrete floor. On the second ring, my voice comes through the receiver. My voice, but wrong. Slower. Each word measured out like it costs something. "You already know," it says. On the third ring, I see what's behind the window. Not dirt. A room. Same size as this basement, same layout, same fluorescent lights. Same workbench. Same filing cabinet. Same me, standing in the center, holding a telephone receiver to his ear. He's watching me. I'm watching him. Between us: the child in the yellow raincoat, hood down, standing in both rooms at once. It turns its blank face toward me. Toward him. It reaches up with both hands and pulls the plaster mask away. Underneath: my face. Not a copy. The original. The one I shaved this morning, the one I've been wearing for thirty-seven years. It opens my mouth. "Blevins was the enemy," it says,

"because Blevins figured out the count was wrong. Not seventeen windows. Not one basement. Twenty-seven houses, one occupant, same night running forward and backward until the loop holds." I set the phone down. The figure across the window does the same. The child holds out the mask. Offering it back. Or offering it forward. I take it. The plaster is warm. Lighter than it should be. I lift it to my face. The last thing I see before it settles into place: the seventeenth window upstairs going bright again. My hand still pressed against the glass, waiting for me to come back and meet it.

Finished on 27 April 2026.

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

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