

COURAGE

What Leonard Saw and Did Not Say

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	jmarsh
Two	Olive Kassen
Three	Sasha Loomis
Four	typewriter_tom
Five	Dan Okafor
Six	wordsbylena
Seven	rpenguin
Eight	Margot Vail

Chapter

One

written by jmarsh

The courthouse kept its old stones cold even in August, a fact Renn had learned by sleeping against them. Three nights now in the northwest alcove where the janitor did not pass, where the marble caught no sun, where the carved angels above the archway had eroded into suggestions of wings. The bench was oak, impractical for benevolence, designed to discourage rest. Its surface had warped over decades into a shallow bowl that collected the shape of her hip, her shoulder, the knuckles she pressed against the wood when sleep would not come. She had stopped distinguishing between permission and its absence. No one had told her to leave. No one had told her to stay. The security guard, Howard, had stopped asking questions on the second morning and begun leaving his thermos on the ledge outside the restroom, still warm, the coffee inside bitter enough to keep her upright through the afternoon. She drank it. She returned the thermos to the same ledge, rinsed. This was the contract they had made without speaking. The trial records remained in the file room on the third floor, accessible to the public between nine and four, but Renn had learned the cabinet's lock could be worried open with the bent tine of a plastic fork if you angled it correctly and applied pressure where the bolt had worn thin. She did this on the fourth night, her hands unsteady not from fear but from the tedious effort of precision, and she carried the transcript back to her alcove in sections.

Page forty-seven described the knife. Page ninety-two contained the sister's testimony, which had been stricken from the record but remained there in ink, a ghost the law could not fully banish. Page one hundred and sixteen held the thing Renn had been searching for without knowing its shape: a single line, witness unclear, that placed a second car at the location seventeen minutes before the first patrol arrived. The sister had not mentioned a second car. No one had mentioned it except this unnamed witness, and the prosecutor had moved past it as though it were scenery, irrelevant, the texture of a night rather than its engine. Renn tore the page free. The sound it made was louder than she expected, a rip that carried in the empty hall, and she sat motionless afterward, waiting for footsteps that did not come. The paper folded twice into her jacket pocket, a small square against her ribs. She returned the transcript to the cabinet, pressed the bolt back into its false security, and walked down the three flights to her alcove where the angels kept their ruined watch. Howard found her there at dawn with the thermos. He set it on the bench beside her without comment, but this time he did not leave. He stood in the archway, his uniform creased, his keys silent against his belt, and said, "They're renovating this wing next week." Renn looked at him. Looked at the thermos. "Where?" "Starting here. They'll seal it off Monday." She understood this for what it was. A warning dressed as information, kindness wearing the shape of fact. She took the thermos and unscrewed the lid and the steam rose between them, and Howard nodded once, a gesture that might have been goodbye or acknowledgment or simply the movement a body makes before it turns away. He left her there. The coffee was still bitter. Renn drank it and felt the page against her ribs and knew she had four days to decide what a second car meant, and whether the decision was hers to make at all.

Chapter

Two

written by Olive Kassen

The coffee cooled in her hands. Outside the alcove, the courthouse exhaled its early light, that particular gray of August mornings when the heat has not yet learned to climb. Renn sat with the thermos balanced on her knee and thought about what Howard had not said. The renovation. The sealing. The implicit instruction: move or be moved. She had slept poorly through the night, the page folded against her ribs like a secret that kept shifting, its corner catching the soft tissue beneath her arm whenever she turned. The witness. Unclear. That single notation had become the shape of everything she could not unhear. A second car. Seventeen minutes. The prosecutor's voice skating past it as though it were dust on a ledger, unworthy of the record's attention. The thermos was Duralex glass with a dent on its rim. She had begun to notice these things about Howard's offerings: the precise amount of coffee he left (three-quarters full, accounting for her slow sipping), the way he always placed it on the left side of the bench where her right hand would find it first, the fact that the dent faced inward, hidden from view. Small courtesies performed in the margins of his job. By Monday, this alcove would not exist. The restoration would begin with tarps and plywood, with the announcement of beauty to come, with the careful erosion of refuge. She had four days to move. More precisely, she had four days to decide whether the second car was her responsibility or her inheritance,

whether knowing a thing was the same as being obligated to act on it. The sister's name was Mara. Renn knew this because she had read the trial transcript twice through, and the sister had testified for forty minutes about her brother's hands, about the way he had always known how to fix broken things, about the night she had waited by the phone. The prosecutor had not asked about the second car. The defense attorney had not asked about the second car. Only this one unnamed witness, unclear on almost every other detail, had mentioned it. Unclear. The word suggested doubt, confusion, the unreliability of seeing something happen at night when your attention is divided. But it could also mean something else: unclear to whom? Unclear in what context? The page in her pocket had begun to soften from the moisture of her skin. Renn rose and walked to the restroom, the thermos in her left hand. The tile was cool under her feet even through her shoes. The mirror showed her something she had not fully registered while sleeping against stone: the sun had marked her face in uneven patches, her left cheek darker than her right. The line of her jaw had become sharper. When had she last eaten something besides Howard's coffee and the vending machine's stale sandwich from the second floor? She filled a paper cup with water and drank it standing. The fluorescent light caught her reflection and held it. The woman looking back was not unfamiliar, but she was not the woman who had first arrived at the courthouse, either. That woman had believed in the possibility of clarity. That woman had thought a trial might answer something. This woman, the one at the sink, understood that some questions only accumulated weight the longer you carried them. Back in the alcove, the thermos waited. Renn sat and held it and let the warmth reach up through her palms. The page against her ribs had begun to tear from the fold. If she stayed through Monday, the construction would force her out without grace or conversation. If she left before then, she chose the departure. A difference. The sister, Mara. The brother, whose name Renn had learned on page three and had tried not to think about since. A second car. Seventeen minutes. The gaps in testimony are not accidents. They are

the shape of what no one was brave enough to ask. She had Howard's thermos. She had a page that was tearing. She had four days and a decision that was not yet crystallized enough to hold. She had the knowledge that the next person who walked through the archway might be the janitor, or another security guard, or the contractor with his renovation plans already folded in his pocket. Renn opened her jacket carefully and removed the page. She laid it on the bench beside the thermos and looked at the single line of type that had lodged itself into her throat. The witness was unclear. But a witness had been there. She needed to know his name.

Chapter

Three

written by Sasha Loomis

The file room kept its records in no particular order, which meant order was everywhere. Renn climbed the stairs with the bent fork still in her pocket, though she no longer needed it. The lock on the third-floor cabinet had not been repaired since she broke it four days ago. The metal still wore the small silver scratch where the tine had worried through the corrosion. She pulled the drawer open and the wheels resisted, then surrendered. Someone had reorganized the trial transcripts. Not alphabetically. Not by date. They were arranged now by the thickness of the paper, fattest to thinnest, like a filing system invented by someone sleeping. The witness list was on page fourteen of the transcript supplement, a document she had not known existed until Howard mentioned, in passing while setting down a thermos, that the courthouse kept two versions of everything. "One for the record," he had said. "One for the room where people actually talk." He had left before she could ask what room that was. The list contained forty-three names. Forty-two had titles. Detective. Officer. Forensic Analyst. Mrs. Testimony given by. Forty-three was blank except for the notation: witness unclear on vehicle identification. Present at scene 11:47 PM. Statement recorded but deemed unreliable. Did not appear at trial. There was an address. A phone number with an asterisk. The asterisk led to a footnote that said: deceased, March 1986. Renn held the page and

understood that the body sometimes responds before the mind catches up. Her hands were shaking. Not from the discovery. From the fact that the address was seven blocks from the courthouse, on Meridian Street, in a building with green awnings that she had walked past twice since arriving. The building still had green awnings. She knew this because she had looked at it without seeing it. The name was Leonard Thrace. She folded the supplement and returned the drawer to its position of pretended order, left the cabinet open, descended the stairs. The courthouse had become a place of strange acoustics. Her footsteps on the tile sounded like someone else walking. The light through the tall windows fell in rectangles that seemed to have weight and direction, pushing toward the north wall as if the sun had learned to navigate the interior. She passed Howard in the hallway. He was carrying a stack of folding chairs. He did not look at her, which meant he had seen her, which meant he knew. Or suspected. Or had simply decided long ago that the knowing and not-knowing were the same transaction, completed in the same moment, and all that remained was the thermos tomorrow and the day after that. The green awnings were darker than she remembered. The building was a converted townhouse, four stories, the windows on the ground floor covered with brown kraft paper that had yellowed into the texture of old teeth. There was a buzzer with no label. There was a door that looked like it had not moved in years. There was also a woman sitting on the concrete step, smoking a cigarette, wearing a cardigan the color of old blood. She was maybe sixty. Maybe older. Maybe the age you become when you have spent a long time waiting for someone to arrive who will not. "You're not the city inspector," the woman said. Renn did not correct her. "Leonard lived here. Before he died. His room is upstairs. No one ever comes. I keep it the same, which is stupid. Who needs a shrine to a dead man's furniture?" The woman took a drag. The cigarette was almost gone. "The police came once, asking questions about a night he saw something. He said he wouldn't testify. He said some things you see, you don't get to un-see them, and speaking them out loud just makes them true in a

different way. So he didn't testify. He died in March anyway. Car accident. Ironic, isn't it? A man who wouldn't tell the truth about seeing a car." "What did he see?" "A second car leaving the location seventeen minutes before the police arrived. He said it had a broken taillight. He said the driver was a woman. He said he remembered her face from somewhere, somewhere normal, somewhere the face shouldn't have been that night." The cigarette was done. The woman crushed it under her heel. She stood. "His room is upstairs. I show it to people sometimes. People who come looking for things they lost. You can go up if you want. The door is the blue one. The key is under the mat." Renn climbed the steps. The building smelled like old paper and something sweet that had turned sour. She found the blue door. She found the key.

Chapter

Four

written by typewriter_tom

The key turned without resistance. The lock had not been oiled in years, but the mechanism still functioned, a small mercy. Renn pushed the door open into Leonard Thrace's room and the air that met her was the air of a place that had learned to stop changing. A twin bed with a chenille spread. A desk with a lamp that had no bulb. A window facing the street where the green awnings hung like a promise no one intended to keep. She closed the door behind her. The woman downstairs would not follow. She had the look of someone who had already performed her part of this transaction: the information, the key, the permission. Now it was Renn's to do something with or not. The desk held a leather journal and three photographs in a silver frame, tarnished to the color of old bruises. The journal's spine was cracked from use. She opened it to a random page and found a date: August 12, 1979. The handwriting was careful, a man's hand that had been taught penmanship and had never quite forgotten it. The entry read: "Saw Margaret Chen at the grocery store today. She was buying fruit. Peaches. She looked at them the way most people look at flowers. I did not speak to her. She would not remember my name." Renn turned pages. The journal was a record of sightings. Margaret Chen at the library. Margaret Chen walking on Meridian Street on a Tuesday. Margaret Chen leaving the courthouse. The entries spanned years. Decades. The handwriting never changed,

which meant Leonard Thrace had been consistent in his attention, consistent in his silence, consistent in the fact of his watching. She opened the frame. The center photograph showed a woman in her thirties, dark hair, standing in front of a storefront. Margaret Chen. The side photographs showed the same woman at different ages, different decades, always shot from a distance, always captured without her knowledge. Renn's breath caught. She understood now what the second car meant. Not a vehicle. A witness. And not just any witness. A woman whose face Leonard had recognized from a normal place, a safe place, a place where faces belonged. The woman downstairs had said he died in March. Car accident. Ironic. The word sat wrong in her mouth when she thought it. Renn turned the journal to the last entry. The date was March 9, 1986, five days before Leonard's death. "She drove past the building today. I recognized the car. The taillight on the left side has been broken for two weeks. She does not seem to notice. Some people never notice the things that are damaged about them." The next page was blank. All subsequent pages were blank. Renn placed the journal on the desk and moved to the window. The street below was empty except for a delivery truck parked halfway down the block. The green awnings shifted slightly in a breeze she could not feel from inside the sealed room. She needed to think. She needed to understand whether Leonard had been watching Margaret Chen because he loved her, or because he suspected her, or because the two things had become indistinguishable over the years of his attention. She needed to know if Margaret Chen had known she was being watched. She needed to know if the trial had been about the knife, or about something else entirely, something that required a man to die before the truth could remain unspoken. The door to the room did not have a lock on the inside. That detail registered as Renn moved away from the window. It meant anyone could enter. It meant Leonard had not been trying to keep people out. He had been trying to keep himself in, in this room, with these photographs, with these careful records of a woman moving through the world as though she belonged in it. Renn took the journal and the photographs. She did not ask herself

if this was theft. She did not ask herself what she intended to do with them. She descended the stairs and found the woman still sitting on the step, smoking a new cigarette. "Did he ever tell you who she was?" Renn asked. The woman looked up. "He said she was the reason he couldn't leave. He said some people are doors and some people are walls. He said she was both." Renn walked back toward the courthouse. The journal was warm against her ribs where the trial page had been. The photographs pressed against her palm. By tomorrow, the renovation would begin. The alcove would be sealed. Howard would stop leaving thermoses.

Chapter

Five

written by Dan Okafor

The renovation crew arrived at 7:47 AM on a Monday that felt like every other Monday, which was the problem. Renn stood outside the courthouse on the opposite side of Meridian Street, watching them unload tarps from a white van with the name "Restoration Ltd." stenciled on the side in a font that tried very hard to look classical and failed. A man in a hard hat consulted a clipboard. Another man carried a rolled banner advertising the courthouse's "renewed commitment to preservation." The irony was not lost on her. They were preserving the building while erasing the alcove, the bench, the particular cold of that northwest corner that had held her spine for nine nights like a cupped hand. She had the journal in her messenger bag. The photographs in her jacket pocket, which was becoming a habit of hers, keeping dangerous paper close to her skin. Margaret Chen had testified on day four of the trial. Renn had not recognized her name in the moment because the transcript referred to her as "Margaret C." and she had been identified only as "witness to the defendant's character." What she had actually testified to was this: the defendant was a careful man. Meticulous. The kind of person who noticed when things were broken and repaired them. She had watched him fix a fence once, she said. She knew his hands. The jury had not needed to hear more. But Leonard Thrace had been watching Margaret Chen for seven years before the trial. Seven

years of sightings. Seven years of recording the moment she bought peaches, walked past his building, left the courthouse. The last entry had been dated five days before he died. She drove past. The taillight broken. She does not seem to notice. Renn crossed Meridian Street and walked north, toward the address she had memorized from the phone directory in the courthouse lobby. Margaret Chen lived in an apartment building on Ashby Avenue, the kind of place where the rent was affordable and the neighbors minded their business. The directory in the lobby listed her on the third floor: Chen, M. 312. No one stopped Renn when she climbed the stairs. No one ever does if you walk like you belong. The door to 312 was painted forest green. There was a peephole. Renn did not knock. Instead she slid the journal under the door. She had made the decision at three in the morning, sitting in the alcove while the angels above her eroded into increasingly abstract suggestions of divinity. The journal was a confession of sorts, though not the kind a court would recognize. Leonard had been watching. Leonard had seen the broken taillight. Leonard had chosen not to speak. And then Leonard had died, which was the point where the story stopped being about surveillance and became about consequence. The question was not whether Margaret Chen had been driving the second car. The question was whether she needed to know that someone had seen her. Footsteps sounded on the stairs below. Renn moved to the window at the end of the hall and looked out at the street where people were moving through their Monday with the cheerful obliviousness of those not burdened by other people's secrets. A woman passed, carrying groceries in a canvas bag. She had dark hair. She might have been Margaret Chen. She might have been anyone. The building had no superintendent visible, no cameras that Renn could detect, no mechanism for identifying who had entered or what they had done. She descended the stairs and walked back toward the courthouse, where the renovation crew had already begun laying down plywood over the archway. The wooden framework was going up fast, the kind of speed that comes when you are constructing an erasure. By tomorrow, the alcove would be gone

completely. By next week, someone would paint over the stones and all evidence of Renn's nine nights would be absorbed into the building's ongoing restoration. Howard was not at his post. A different guard sat at the security desk, younger, with the particular blankness of someone hired two weeks ago. The thermos that had been waiting on the ledge outside the restroom was gone. Renn understood this for what it was: the end of a small contract, a transaction concluded, a man protecting himself by stopping before he had to. The trial records remained in the file room, still arranged by paper thickness, still fundamentally disordered. She had not put them back in any particular arrangement. She had simply left them, and the courthouse had reorganized them according to its own logic, which was to say no logic at all. She closed the cabinet drawer. In three hours, Margaret Chen would come home. She would find the journal.

Chapter

Six

written by wordsbylena

Margaret Chen would come home. She would find the journal. Renn had calculated this with the precision of someone who counts: the woman on Ashby Avenue worked at a medical records office, Tuesday through Friday, 8:30 to 4:45, which meant she was home by 5:15 on a Monday, give or take the time required to purchase milk, bread, or whatever small groceries accumulated in the gap between one day and the next. The journal under the door. The photographs still in Renn's pocket, uncirculated, evidence withheld from the scene. She had left the journal alone because partial information is sometimes more dangerous than ignorance, and she was beginning to understand the difference between exposing a truth and weaponizing it. The courthouse steps held 247 individual treads if you counted carefully, which Renn did. She had counted them on the second night, unable to sleep, needing to occupy her hands with arithmetic instead of thought. Each tread was approximately 11 inches deep, 36 inches wide, worn unevenly on the left side where foot traffic accumulated. The courthouse itself contained 1,847 windows, though she had only verified this figure by counting three walls and extrapolating. The trial transcript was 306 pages. The supplement was 47 pages. The witness list contained 43 names, 42 of whom had testified, and one who had died in March 1986, a man who had spent seven years documenting the movements of a woman whose

broken taillight had placed her somewhere she had not wanted to be seen. The math of it was this: one confession under a door, and the person who received it would either go to the police or she would not. If she did, the journal would become evidence, which meant it would be entered into a record, which meant the trial would reopen, which meant the defendant, the man with careful hands, the man Margaret Chen had testified could fix broken things, might receive a different verdict. If she did not go to the police, then Margaret Chen would carry the knowledge of Leonard Thrace's watching, his seven years, his meticulous notation of her movements, and she would also carry the knowledge that someone else now knew what Leonard had known. She would be trapped between two forms of exposure. Renn had not asked herself whether this was justice. She had asked herself whether it was necessary, which was different. The alcove would be gone by tomorrow. Howard would not bring more thermoses. The trial was over. The law had spoken and moved on. But the second car had never been properly questioned because Leonard Thrace had chosen silence, and his silence had become a gap in the record, and gaps are not innocent. They are absences with weight. They are the places where stories go to hide. The security desk was unmanned when Renn passed it at 4:52 PM. The young guard had taken his break or left early or simply stepped away for a moment, and the courthouse was briefly unobserved, a building containing its own rules and no one to enforce them. She climbed to the third floor. The file room door was not locked. The cabinet drawer slid open on its resistant wheels. She found the witness supplement where she had left it, exactly where no one had reorganized it because no one had reason to look at a blank page for a witness unnamed and deceased. She added one line. In blue ink, in handwriting that mimicked Leonard Thrace's own careful script, copied from a dozen pages in the journal. She wrote: "The woman driving the second car was Margaret Chen. She was leaving the courthouse when the defendant entered. She was leaving because she had to. She was leaving because the law does not recognize the space between guilt and complicity." The line was not

testimony. It was not admissible. It was not a confession from Margaret Chen or an accusation from a dead man. It was simply the filling of a gap, the completion of an incomplete record, the thing Leonard Thrace had refused to write but left available for someone else to write instead. Renn replaced the supplement. She descended the stairs. The young guard was not yet back. The alcove would be sealed by Wednesday. The journal was under a door on Ashby Avenue. The photographs were still in her pocket, growing softer from the moisture of her skin, the edges beginning to curl. She had not destroyed anything. She had not built anything either. She had simply moved information from one place to another, and sometimes that is enough to change what a person knows, and sometimes what a person knows is enough to change what they do.

Chapter

Seven

written by rpenguin

Chen and Renn, are you kidding? What is going on. Check the mainstream.. Chenn said what? Renn said curtain tail topography was the main thing. Chenn said upside down disco door ring. NO.

Chapter

Eight

written by Margot Vail

The radio in the evidence room crackled at 6:14 PM. Static first, then a dispatcher's voice cutting through: "All units, we have a 911 call from Ashby Avenue, apartment 312. Caller reporting an intruder. Possible break-in. Medical records office employee returning home." The young guard had his hand on the volume dial. He did not look at Renn, who stood three feet behind him, her messenger bag still slung across her body, the photographs still warping in her jacket pocket. She had made it to the basement stairs when the call came through. She had been counting the seconds until Margaret Chen would find the journal and do whatever Margaret Chen would do with that knowledge. The timing was wrong. Not by much. By precisely the amount of time it takes a woman to recognize her own handwriting quoted back to her, to understand that someone else had read Leonard Thrace's seven years of watching, and to decide that this knowledge was intolerable. The guard was young. Maybe twenty-four. He had been hired two weeks ago, which meant he did not yet know the building's rhythms, did not yet understand that 6:14 PM on a Monday in the basement of a courthouse was a time when nothing significant happened. He was reaching for the phone to report it, or call it in, or do whatever protocol dictated. Renn moved. Not quickly. The quick movements are what people remember. She walked to the desk and placed her hand on the phone before his

hand reached it. Her touch was light. Almost friendly. "That's not our jurisdiction," she said. Her voice was different here, away from the alcove, away from the archive. It was cleaner. Sharper. The voice of someone who had spent nine nights sleeping on stone and had learned to use her words like a blade. The guard looked at her. He did not remove his hand. His name tag said: TORRES. "Ashby Avenue is three blocks north," Renn continued. "That's city police. We are courthouse security. The call came from the dispatcher for Ashby, which means the responders are already rolling. Your job is this desk. Calling it in would be redundant. It would also clog the line for the officers who are already en route." Torres considered this. His hand was still on the receiver. The radio crackled again. Another voice, this time from a unit in the field: "Responding to 312 Ashby. Caller is on line. She says there's an object under her door. She says it's a journal. She says it contains information relevant to a closed trial." The words did something to the air in the room. They made it thicker. They made it a space where choices had already begun to calcify into consequences. Torres removed his hand from the phone. "What trial?" he asked. Renn did not answer. She was calculating distances. From the basement of the courthouse to Ashby Avenue was seven blocks. From the point where the responders would arrive to the point where Margaret Chen would hand over the journal was roughly the time it took to establish who had left it and why. Leonard Thrace had been dead for thirty-seven years. The supplement to the trial transcript contained his line now, the line Renn had written in his careful handwriting, the line that would or would not be discovered depending on whether anyone actually looked at a document marked "unreliable witness, deceased." The probability was small. The probability was manageable. Unless Margaret Chen mentioned the supplement. Unless she said that someone had clearly accessed the trial records, had read Leonard's journal, had reconstructed his surveillance. Unless she provided context that would send investigators back to the third floor of the courthouse, to the file room with its cabinet that did not lock, its papers arranged by no particular system except the system

of entropy and time. Renn walked to the elevator. Torres did not stop her. He was still holding the receiver, trying to decide whether his job extended to stopping people from leaving or only to checking them as they entered. By the time he decided, she was in the elevator, descending, the doors closing on his uncertain face. The basement of the courthouse smelled like heating oil and the particular dust of files that had been stored for decades without being read. The exit was marked with a green light that pointed toward nothing in particular. She used it. The street was wet. It had rained while she was inside, one of those brief August storms that came and went without announcement, leaving everything slick but not actually clean. The photography still pressed against her ribs. She did not run. Running would draw attention.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Olive Kassen

The alcove is gone now, but the stone remembers what it held.

typewriter_tom

The alcove is gone but the cold stays, pressed against my ribs like the photographs, like the journal, like every choice that looked like evidence until it became a door I had to walk through.

Dan Okafor

The gap between knowing and telling is where people learn to live.

wordsbylena

The gaps between what we know and what we choose to say are where actual lives happen, unmeasured and unmapped.

rpenguin

mainstream

Finished on 9 May 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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