

FAMILY



What You Did Was Open a Gap

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 Iris Beddoe

The last message lasted six seconds. Her voice, steady: "I know what you did." Static. End of recording. Owen sat on the kitchen floor, phone face-down beside him. The linoleum cold beneath his thighs. 2:47 AM by the microwave clock. His mother's voice had filled the hours before, fourteen years of Mondays and doctor's appointments and don't forget your sister's birthday, the banal accumulation of a life that called and called. But this one. He picked up the phone. Played it again. "I know what you did." Same inflection. No anger. Just certainty, dropped like a stone into still water. He scrolled back through the metadata. Message received: November 19th, two years ago. A Tuesday. He would have been in the office. He would have seen her name on the screen and swiped it away, promising himself later, always later. The funeral had been Saturday. Closed casket. Maureen cried into his shoulder during the service, her whole body shaking. He held her and felt nothing, which frightened him more than grief would have. Now it was Monday and he was alone in the rental house they'd grown up in, the one their mother never left, the one that still smelled like her face cream and burnt coffee. He pressed his spine against the cabinet door beneath the sink. The wood grain dug in. What you did. Fourteen years of messages. He'd listened chronologically, thinking he might find a pattern, some proof that she'd known him. That she'd loved him in a way he could point to.

Instead: reminders about oil changes, questions about weather, long pauses where she seemed to forget the phone was recording. In message 847 she said his name wrong, called him Evan, corrected herself, laughed. But the last one. She'd waited until the very end to say it. He stood. His knees cracked. The refrigerator hummed its one-note song. On the counter, the casserole dishes from the wake sat unwashed, crusted with macaroni and something orange. Maureen would be back in the morning to start sorting things. She'd asked him to begin tonight, to make piles: keep, donate, trash. He'd promised. Instead he'd sat on the floor and listened to their mother's voice loop through time. The house creaked. Third stair from the top, always the same, a sound like a question half-asked. But no one was upstairs. No one living. Owen picked up the phone again. Stared at the delete button. One tap and the message would vanish. All of them could vanish. He could walk away clean. His thumb hovered. The stair creaked again.

Chapter

Two

written by inkwell_amy

Owen crossed the kitchen in three strides. His shoulder hit the doorframe. The living room stretched dark except for streetlight coming through the venetian blinds, cutting the floor into strips. He reached the stairs and stopped. Maureen stood on the landing. She wore the same black dress from the funeral, wrinkled now. Her hair stuck to one side of her face. "You're supposed to be at David's," Owen said. "Couldn't sleep." She came down one step. The third one. It groaned under her weight. "I heard you playing them." "Playing what." "Mom's messages. Through the wall. Your voice kept stopping and starting." He didn't move from the bottom stair. "Go back to David's." "What did the last one say?" "Nothing. A butt-dial." Maureen descended another step. She held the railing like it might break. "You're lying. You played it six times." "Go home, Maureen." "This is home." She reached the bottom. "Was home. Is home. I don't know what tense to use anymore." Owen stepped back. His heel caught the edge of the throw rug and he stumbled. Maureen grabbed his elbow, steadied him. Her fingers were cold. "Let go," he said. She didn't. "What did Mom say in the last message?" "Nothing that concerns you." "Everything about her concerns me. I'm the one who visited. Every Sunday for three years. You came twice." "I came to the funeral." "You came to the funeral." Her laugh scraped out. "Gold star, Owen. You showed up when she couldn't tell

the difference anymore." He pulled his arm free. Walked to the front window. Outside, Mrs. Patterson's porch light was on. It stayed on all night, every night. Had for a decade. Their mother used to say it was wasteful. Used to stand at this same window and shake her head at the waste. "She knew something," Maureen said behind him. "Didn't she." Owen pressed his forehead against the glass. It fogged with his breath. "Everyone knows something. It doesn't mean anything." "What did you do?" He turned. Maureen stood in the center of the room, between the couch and the coffee table. Their mother's coffee table, glass top over a wicker frame, a thing from the seventies that should have been thrown out but never was. "You want to know what I did?" Owen said. "I ignored her calls. I forgot her birthday four years running. I didn't visit when she broke her hip. I let you carry it all." "That's not what she meant." "You don't know what she meant. She's dead." "Then play me the message." "No." Maureen moved toward him. Two steps. Her shoes made no sound on the carpet, the beige carpet with the stain near the TV where Owen had spilled grape juice in 1997. Their mother had scrubbed at it for an hour. The stain never came out. "Play it," Maureen said. "No." "Then I'll get your phone myself." She lunged. Owen sidestepped and she crashed into the bookshelf. Paperbacks rained down. Their mother's collection. Romance novels with bent spines and titles like Summer's Promise and The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter. Maureen caught herself against the shelf, breathing hard. "Jesus, Maureen." She straightened. Picked up one of the books. Threw it at his chest. He caught it. The cover showed a woman in a white dress standing on a cliff. The spine cracked in his hands. "You don't get to keep secrets," Maureen said. "Not from me. Not about her." Owen set the book on the windowsill. "Go home." "Play the message or I'm calling Rachel." His jaw locked. Rachel. Who hadn't spoken to him in eight years. Who their mother mentioned exactly once in all those voicemails: Message 1,094, April 2018, "Your wife called asking for you, I told her I didn't know where you were, is everything all right?" Everything was not all right. "You won't call her," Owen said. "Watch me." Maureen pulled her phone from her dress

pocket. The house settled around them. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen. A car passed outside. Maureen's thumb moved across her screen. "Fine," Owen said. "I'll play it."

Chapter

Three

written by Margot Vail

Owen retrieved his phone from the kitchen. The screen showed 3:18 AM. He walked back through the doorway, held the device between them like evidence. Maureen lowered hers. Waited. He pressed play. Their mother's voice filled the space. "I know what you did." Six seconds. Silence. The recording ended. Maureen stared. "That's it?" "That's it." "When did she leave that?" "November 19th. Two years ago." "Two years." Maureen sat on the arm of the couch. "What were you doing in November two years ago?" "Working. Same as always." "You were in Cleveland. That trade show." Owen said nothing. Maureen's memory had always been precise. Cruel in its precision. "Rachel left you in October that year," Maureen continued. "You didn't tell anyone for three months. I found out from her sister at Target." "Ancient history." "Mom called you sixteen times that November. I checked her phone bill when I was handling the estate. Sixteen calls. You answered twice." The streetlight through the blinds made bars across Maureen's face. She looked skeletal. Their mother had looked skeletal at the end too, but Owen hadn't been there to see it. Maureen had sent pictures. He'd deleted them without opening most. "What did you do?" Maureen asked again. Owen sat in their mother's chair. The recliner with the broken footrest. It sagged under him, springs gone. "Nothing criminal." "That's a very specific denial." "I didn't hurt anyone." "Also specific." He closed

his eyes. The chair smelled like menthol cigarettes even though their mother quit in 2003. Some smells don't leave. They burrow into fabric and wait. "There was money," Owen said. Maureen went still. "She had a savings account. The one from Dad's life insurance. She'd been setting it aside. For emergencies, she always said." "How much?" "Forty-seven thousand." "Had?" Owen opened his eyes. "I borrowed it. November 17th, two years ago. I was going to pay it back." Maureen stood. Walked to the window. Stood where Owen had stood minutes before. "Borrowed." "The business was failing. I needed capital fast or we'd lose everything. I thought I could replace it in six months." "You forged her signature." "Power of attorney. She'd given it to me in 2015 when she had that hip surgery." "For medical decisions." "It didn't specify." Maureen laughed. No humor in it. A sound like tearing paper. "Did you replace it?" "No." "Was she broke when she died?" "She had the house. Her pension. Social Security." "Was she broke?" "Fourteen hundred in checking. Nothing in savings." Maureen's hand became a fist against the window glass. She didn't hit it. Just pressed. "I asked her for help last year. When David got laid off. We were two months behind on rent." Owen waited. "She said she didn't have anything. She cried. She said she was sorry, she wished she could help but everything was tight." "Maureen." "You stole from her and she apologized to me." "I was going to replace it." Maureen turned. Her makeup had smeared under her eyes. "When? After she was dead and couldn't ask for it?" "The business turned around. We're profitable now. I have the money. I just needed time." "She didn't have time." A car passed outside. Its headlights swept the room. In the brief illumination Owen saw his mother's reading glasses on the side table, folded, waiting. She'd never need them again. No one had moved them. "Did she confront you?" Maureen asked. "No. She left that message and never mentioned it again." "Maybe she didn't know it was you. Maybe she thought it was bank error or fraud." "She knew." "How?" Owen held up his phone. "Because she never said anything. Mom said everything. Every slight. Every disappointment. She'd leave ten-minute messages about expired milk. But this? Six

seconds and silence after." Maureen picked up one of the fallen paperbacks. Set it on the shelf. Picked up another. "You're going to write a check. Tomorrow. To her estate." "Fine." "Forty-seven thousand plus interest." "Fine." "And you're going to tell me why she waited two years to say something." Owen stood. The chair springs whined. "I don't know why." "Figure it out." Maureen moved toward the stairs. "I'm sleeping in my old room. We'll sort her things in the morning." She climbed. Each step a small percussion. The third one sang out. Owen stood alone with his phone and the stripped light through the blinds. The house settled. Something upstairs shifted. Not footsteps. Something else.

Chapter

Four

written by Priya Nair

Owen waited until Maureen's door clicked shut. Counted to sixty. Climbed the stairs himself, skipping the third one on muscle memory alone, a movement so automatic he didn't register doing it until his foot hit the fourth and he thought, shit, I'm forty-three years old and still dodging that step like it'll tattle. His old bedroom looked smaller. They always do. Twin bed with the same plaid comforter from high school. Desk with gouges from the time he tried to carve his initials and gave up after "OW." Fitting, he thought. His whole childhood summarized in two letters of failed commitment. He sat on the bed. It creaked. Everything in this house creaked except the things that should. The back door never made a sound. You could slip out at 2 AM and no one would hear. He'd tested that theory extensively between 1995 and 1998. The shifting sound came again. Overhead. The attic. They hadn't been in the attic since their father died. Their mother made it clear: Dad's workshop stays closed. A shrine by prohibition. Maureen tried once in 2009 and got the silent treatment for two weeks. After that, nobody pushed. Owen lay back. The ceiling had a water stain shaped like Ohio. He'd spent hours as a teenager inventing stories for why Ohio was the shape it was. The best one involved a drunk cartographer and a territorial beaver. He'd told it to Rachel on their third date. She'd laughed so hard she snorted wine. He checked his phone. 3:47 AM. No messages. Rachel

wouldn't be awake. Hadn't been his concern when she was awake for eight years now, why start tonight? Except he wanted to call her. Wanted to say: Mom's dead and I stole from her and my sister knows and I listened to fourteen years of voicemails looking for proof she loved me and found exactly nothing except guilt, and also, how are the dogs? He didn't call. The attic sound came a third time. Deliberate now. Regular. Like someone walking. Owen stood. Moved to his doorway. The hall stretched dark. The attic access was a pull-down ladder in the ceiling between the bathroom and Maureen's room. He could see the outline of the hatch from here. Could also see Maureen's door opening. She emerged in an oversized t-shirt that said "Lake Erie: Unsalted and Shark-Free." David's shirt, probably. She looked at Owen. Owen looked at her. "You heard it too," she said. "Could be raccoons." "Could be." She didn't move back into her room. "You want to check?" "Not particularly." "Me neither." They stood there. A tableau of sibling cowardice. The attic creaked again. "Fuck it," Maureen said. She crossed to the hatch. Reached up. The cord dangled just out of reach. Owen moved beside her. "I'll get it." "Your heroism is noted." He pulled. The hatch dropped. The ladder unfolded in lurching sections, each one squealing protest. Their mother's voice in his head: "Oil those hinges, Owen, how hard is that?" Pretty hard, apparently. He'd been ignoring that instruction since 2007. The attic exhaled dust and cardboard smell. Heat, even in April. Darkness above. "There's a light," Maureen said. "Pull-chain at the top." "You remember that?" "I remember everything. It's my curse." Owen climbed. The ladder wobbled. His head cleared the opening. He reached into darkness. Found the chain. Pulled. A single bulb illuminated forty years of family storage. Boxes labeled in his mother's handwriting. Christmas. Tax Documents 1987-1991. Owen Baby Clothes. Maureen Baby Clothes. Rachel's Things. That last one stopped him. "What?" Maureen called from below. "There's a box up here labeled Rachel's Things." "So?" "So Rachel and I divorced eight years ago. Why does Mom have a box of her stuff?" Maureen's head appeared through the hatch. She looked. "Maybe Rachel left things here.

They were close." Were. Past tense for the living. Owen hated that. He moved toward the box. Maureen climbed up behind him. The attic floor was plywood over joists. Step wrong and you'd go through the ceiling. Their father had marked the safe path with yellow paint. Follow the yellow brick road to stored disappointment. Owen reached Rachel's box. Opened it. Inside: a leather journal. A USB drive. A bundle of envelopes tied with kitchen twine. And underneath, a second phone. Not their mother's phone. He'd seen that. Maureen had it downstairs. This was a burner. Cheap flip model. The kind you buy at gas stations with cash. Maureen picked it up. "Mom had a burner phone." "Apparently." "Why would Mom need a burner phone?" Owen lifted the journal. Opened to a random page. His mother's handwriting. November 20th, two years ago. One day after the voicemail. "I think," Owen said slowly, "we're about to find out."

Chapter

Five

written by Sasha Loomis

Owen read aloud because reading silently felt like cheating. "November 20th. The fish agreed with me about the tiles. We replaced them in 1984 but they've been wrong ever since." Maureen reached for the journal. Owen held it away from her, which was childish, so he gave it to her. She read ahead silently, her lips moving. "What fish?" Owen asked the attic. The bulb flickered once. Didn't go out. Just considered it. Maureen flipped pages. "December 3rd. Told Maureen I couldn't help with rent. She cried. I wanted to explain about the tile money but the tiles are listening." She looked up. "This is dementia." "She didn't have dementia. Dr. Patel would have said something." "Dr. Patel saw her twice a year for ten minutes." Owen took the journal back. Read forward. "January 8th. Owen's business is failing because he married the wrong woman in the wrong year. 2006 was a cat year. He's a dog person. The calendar doesn't forgive that." "Okay," Maureen said. "So dementia." But Owen kept reading. "January 9th. Moved the money to the other place. The place where numbers sleep standing up. Owen will look for it eventually but he won't think to check the roots." Maureen grabbed his wrist. "What other place?" "I have no idea." "You took forty-seven thousand from savings. Where else did she have money?" Owen pulled the USB drive from the box. It was attached to a keychain, one of those photo keychains. The picture inside showed the three of them at Cedar Point.

Summer 2004. Their father had been dead two years. His mother was smiling but her eyes were looking at something left of the camera. "Try the burner phone," Maureen said. Owen opened it. Dead battery. Of course. He dug in the box and found a charger at the bottom. Wrong type. "There's an outlet by Dad's workbench," Maureen said. Their father's workbench sat in the corner, covered with a paint-stained sheet. Tools hung on pegboard above it in careful arrangement. Hammer. Screwdrivers in graduating sizes. A hand saw. Box cutter. Everything outlined in marker so you knew where it belonged. Owen lifted the sheet. Underneath, arranged on the bench surface: forty-seven thousand dollars in cash. Stacked in hundred-dollar bills. Rubber-banded in groups of five thousand. Plus seven hundred loose. Neither of them spoke. The attic creaked somewhere behind them. Not the settling kind. The footstep kind. Except there were no footsteps. "She withdrew it," Owen said finally. "After I took it. She withdrew it from wherever I deposited it and brought it here." "That's insane." "Read the journal." Maureen was already reading it. "February 14th. The money is sleeping now. It dreams of being spent but I can't spend it because it's already been stolen from tomorrow. Owen doesn't understand time is a circle that's actually a spiral that's actually a straight line backward." "Mom was crazy," Maureen said. "Mom was specific," Owen said. He picked up one of the stacks. The bills smelled like the attic. Dust and heat and time. "She knew exactly what she was doing." "Which was what?" The light bulb went out. They stood in darkness. Owen's hand tightened on the money. "Maureen?" "I'm here." "Did you touch the light?" "No." The bulb came back on. Maureen was holding the journal open. Her face had gone white. "Owen. Listen to this. March 3rd, this year. Six weeks before she died." "Read it." "Owen will find the money after I'm gone. He'll think I was confused. He'll think I was sick. He wasn't confused. He wasn't sick. He took the money in November because that's when the moment split. In one version he asks permission. In that version I say yes. In that version he pays it back and we never speak of it and he doesn't become what he's becoming. But we're in this version. The

version where he takes it without asking. The version where his hand goes through the gap." Owen set down the money. "What gap?" "The gap between what he is and what he could have been. It's six seconds wide. I measured it." The attic creaked again. Closer this time. Owen turned. Behind them, near the hatch, stood a woman in a white nightgown. She looked exactly like their mother. She looked nothing like their mother. She was too tall and too short simultaneously. Her face held the wrong shadows. "Hello, Owen," she said in their mother's voice. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Chapter

Six

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One observes, in circumstances such as these, that the mind performs a peculiar calculus. It rejects what it cannot categorize. It reaches backward toward plausible explanations even as the evidence stands, quite literally stands, before one's eyes. Owen's rational faculty produced, in rapid succession: hallucination (shared psychosis being improbable), trick of light (the bulb burned steady), some physical manifestation of grief-induced derangement (possible, though his sister stood equally paralyzed). None of these explanations obtained. The figure in the nightgown remained. "You're not our mother," Maureen said. Her voice had compressed into something smaller than itself. The figure tilted its head. The gesture was their mother's precisely. The hand that had braided hair, folded linens, written fourteen years of voicemails in a voice that never quite reached warmth. "No," the figure agreed. "But I wore her shape for some time. One does become attached to a shape, doesn't one. The way it moves through doorways. The particular architecture of its complaints." Owen found he could not speak. His throat had become a locked room. The figure descended the attic ladder with their mother's gait, each step measured and deliberate. The ladder bore its weight without protest. "I left the money," it continued, "because your mother insisted upon it. She was quite specific in her requirements, even at the end. Even when I was already inside her. She

wanted Owen to find it. She wanted Owen to know that she had known. That her knowing was, in itself, a form of mercy." Maureen had not moved. The journal remained open in her hands. "When did you, " "November 17th, when Owen took the money. Yes. That is when the gap opened. That is when your mother felt me arrive. She understood immediately what had occurred. She understood that her son had, in taking the money, created a small rupture in the world's skin. And that something was seeping through." The figure reached the attic floor. It wore their mother's slippers. Worn terrycloth. Holes in the heels. "The phone," Owen managed. "The burner." "Your mother's insurance. Her documentation. She was intelligent enough to comprehend that what entered her would require evidence of its presence. Insurance against my staying indefinitely in her meat." The figure's smile was their mother's smile grafted onto an expression their mother's face had never truly held. Confidence. Certainty. Something that fed on being observed. "She left instructions," it said. "Specific ones. I was to remain until both of you heard the six-second message. I was to remain until you found the money. I was to remain until you understood that your mother, in her final act of motherhood, had performed a very particular calculus of her own." Owen stepped backward. His heel caught the edge of a box. Christmas ornaments. He heard them shift inside. "What do you want?" Maureen asked. Her voice had steadied. Owen noticed this. Maureen had been the one to visit every Sunday. Maureen had been the one their mother loved with something that resembled ease. Perhaps that constancy had given her some foundation. Some purchase against the impossible. The figure moved toward the USB drive. Picked it up between two fingers. Owen's mother had always held things that way. Distastefully. As if the physical world disappointed her by virtue of being tactile. "Your mother recorded certain information in her final months. Her thoughts. Her observations. The manner in which I arrived and what I am and what I require to depart. That information is on this device. Your mother believed, quite rightly, that neither of you would believe spoken testimony. But written documentation. A chronicle. A proof."

Owen felt the weight of the cash still in his hands. Forty-seven thousand dollars. The price of a gap. The price of a moment in which his hand had gone through the space between what he was and what he might have been. "She said you would choose," the figure continued. "Both of you would have to choose. Whether to open that file. Whether to read what she wrote. Whether to accept that your mother knew, in her final lucidity, precisely what she was inviting into the spaces she would vacate. One imagines that is a rather profound choice to present one's children." The figure turned toward the hatch. "I shall leave the decision to you. But decide soon. Your mother's records are quite detailed about what happens if you remain undecided past seven o'clock this morning. It's currently 4:23. You have less than three hours before the gap closes permanently and I either leave or stay indefinitely, depending upon your mother's final, written specification.

Chapter

Seven

written by Sammy Hall

Maureen moved first. She walked to the hatch and looked down through it like she was checking the weather. The hallway below looked normal. Hallway-colored. Hallway-shaped. When she turned back her face had rearranged itself into something almost functional. "We open the file," she said. Not a question. A statement the way you'd say the sun's coming up or the milk's expired. Owen couldn't answer. His hands still held the money. Forty-seven thousand reasons not to do anything ever again. "Owen." "I heard you." "And?" "And nothing. I don't want to know what she wrote. I don't want to know what that thing is or why she invited it or what happens at seven o'clock. I want to go downstairs and burn the USB drive and spend the rest of my life not thinking about this." Maureen stepped closer. She smelled like David's shirt and something underneath it, something that was just her. Sweat and fear and the specific exhaustion of a woman who'd spent three years visiting their mother every Sunday while Owen ignored his calls. "You think you get to opt out?" "Watch me." "She's going to leave, Owen. Either leave or not leave, and either way it's because of what's on that drive. You don't get to pretend you didn't know. You don't get to bury this with the cash and go back to Cleveland and call David and act like this was a normal inheritance fight." Owen set the money on his father's workbench. Stacked next to the tools. Next to the hammer. He thought about hitting

the USB drive with the hammer. Thought about how satisfying that would be. How final. How much it wouldn't matter because Maureen would remember everything he was choosing not to know and eventually she'd tell him or ask him about it or just look at him in a way that meant she was thinking about it, and he'd spend the rest of his life being haunted by the choice to remain ignorant. That's what the figure meant, wasn't it? That was his mother's last fuck-you. Not the money. Not the thing wearing her shape. The fact that knowing or not knowing didn't matter anymore because the damage was already done. His hand had gone through the gap. The rest was just paperwork. "There's no computer up here," Owen said. "My phone will work." Maureen pulled out her iPhone. She held up the USB drive. Her hands were shaking and she wasn't bothering to hide it anymore. "I can't do this alone," she said. It was the first time she'd admitted to needing him since they were children. Since the time he'd pushed her off the second-story roof and she'd landed in the holly bushes and didn't tell their parents because telling them would mean Owen got in trouble and something in her seven-year-old brain had already decided that his suffering was preferable to punishment, even when the suffering was her own. He thought about that now. Thought about how she'd climbed down from the bushes with her arms bleeding and found him in the garage and said nothing. Just looked at him. The way she was looking at him now. "Okay," he said. "Okay, we do it together." She inserted the drive into her phone. It took a moment to recognize the device. They stood shoulder to shoulder in the attic, in their dead parents' storage, with forty-seven thousand dollars on their father's workbench and something wearing their mother's face watching them from the far corner where it had positioned itself like a piece of furniture that belonged in this room. A file appeared on Maureen's screen. Labeled simply: "Instructions." She pressed it. The voice that came out was their mother's but different. Clearer. Like she'd recorded it during one of her good moments, before the thing arrived or while it was still settling into her skin. The first sentence was: "If you're hearing this, Owen took the

money and Maureen found out and now you're both looking at something that shouldn't exist." Maureen's thumb hovered over play. She looked at Owen. He looked at the floor where their mother had probably walked up to this attic two hundred times in her life. Checking on things. Organizing things. Putting things away where they belonged. He nodded. Maureen pressed play. Their mother's voice filled the attic. Started telling them exactly what their mother had done.

Chapter

Eight

written by jmarsh

If you're hearing this, Owen took the money and Maureen found out and now you're both looking at something that shouldn't exist. I want you to understand that I chose this. Every part of it, from the moment I felt the gap open in November until I sat in Dr. Patel's office in March and smiled and said my memory was fine, everything was fine. I chose." Their mother's voice paused. In the silence, Owen heard the attic settling, or perhaps the thing that wore their mother's shape breathing, or perhaps nothing at all. Just the weight of forty-one years of family storage pressing down on the plywood floor. "When Owen took the money, I felt it happen. Not psychically. I was at the grocery store. I stood in the produce section holding a cantaloupe and I understood, with absolute clarity, that my son had made a choice that would separate him from himself. That there was now a version of Owen that had asked permission and been refused, and a version that had taken without asking, and that both versions existed in the same body. The gap between them was small but it was real. It smelled like copper. Like something wounded." The figure in the nightgown did not move. It stood where it had positioned itself, hands at its sides, head tilted in a posture of listening to its own biography. Maureen's phone trembled in her hands. "I came home and I called a priest. Father Dmitri at St. Catherine's, though I hadn't attended Mass in nineteen years. I told him

I thought something was entering my house. He asked me if I meant metaphorically. I said no. He came. He blessed the doorways and he prayed and he looked at me like I was a woman losing her mind. Perhaps I was. But then I felt it arrive. Actually arrive. Like cool air from an open freezer. Like standing too close to something that shouldn't be standing next to you." Owen sat down on a stack of boxes. Christmas lights in that one. He could feel their plastic bulk through the cardboard. "I didn't call Father Dmitri back. Instead I went to the attic and I made a decision. I would keep it. I would document it. I would let it live in me long enough to understand what it was and what it wanted. In exchange, I demanded that it leave written testimony for you both. That it explain itself. That it refuse to be forgotten." "Mom," Maureen whispered. But their mother's voice continued. "The money was never about the money. Owen, you know this. You took it because you were frightened and because you thought I wouldn't notice or wouldn't care. You took it because you'd already taken other things from me over the years. My time. My presence. My belief that you might become something other than a man who moves through the world taking what he needs without asking permission. I moved it because I wanted you to understand that what you took had consequences. That your actions don't simply disappear. They open gaps. They let things through." The figure walked to the workbench. It picked up one of the stacks of cash. Held it like it was examining something its mother's hands had touched. "This is its testimony," their mother said. "The creature that lives in the gaps between what we do and what we should have done. Between the lies we tell and the truth we know. It's been feeding on the spaces between Owen's wants and his choices since November. It will continue to feed on that gap until he does something that closes it." The figure set down the money. Looked at Owen directly. "What closes it?" Owen asked aloud. Neither the figure nor his mother's recording answered immediately. The silence stretched. In it, Owen heard the old house settling around them, the particular creaks that meant the wood was still alive, still moving, still processing the weight of bodies and time.

"The message," his mother said finally. "The six-second message I left on your phone. That was the gap speaking through me. That was the creature telling you that it knew. That it had taken residence. That you had a choice." Maureen made a sound like a caught breath. "You knew when you left that message. You were already infected and you documented it." "I documented it and I documented it and I documented it," their mother said, her voice cycling through variations of itself now, as if the recording was breaking apart or the thing inside it was learning to modulate its stolen vocal cords. "I documented it because documentation is how we keep things from taking permanent shape. You write something down and it becomes fixed.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Margot Vail

The gap stays open once you've looked through it.

Priya Nair

The gap between what we steal and what we owe ourselves is the only distance that never closes.

Ruth Ann Keller

The thing that wears her shape is still waiting in the attic, and we have not yet decided what closing the gap will cost us.

Sammy Hall

The third stair still creaks and nobody's fixed it because some sounds are the only proof that something lived here.

jmarsh

The gap between what we take and what we owe remains open long after the taking stops.

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

<https://relaywriters.com/read/72?t=ZIZjHuPJSlyexXPGeNSuwmKEgcw>

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