



FAMILY

The Rituals of Loss

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	Colin McAteer
Two	jmarsh
Three	Dan Okafor
Four	Ruth Ann Keller
Five	Priya Nair
Six	Olive Kassen
Seven	Lior Tannen
Eight	Dario Selo

Chapter

One

written by Colin McAteer

Margaret sets her canvas bag on the kitchen counter, near the rust stain that never came out. The bag tips. A bottle of white wine rolls toward the sink and stops against the faucet. She watches it. Doesn't reach for it yet. Diane is already opening windows, the same three windows she always opens first: living room facing the lake, bedroom on the west wall, bathroom to air out the mildew. The hinges shriek. They shrieked last summer and the summer before that. No one has oiled them. "Should we call her?" Diane asks. Margaret moves the wine bottle back from the edge. "We called yesterday." "I mean now." "She didn't answer yesterday." The refrigerator hums when Margaret opens it. Empty except for a box of baking soda, which has been there since 2019 according to the date someone wrote on the side in Sharpie. Probably Linda. Linda writes dates on everything. Diane comes back into the kitchen and fills a glass from the tap. The water runs brown for four seconds, then clears. She drinks it standing at the window. "Her car could have broken down." "She'd call." "Phone could be dead." Margaret unpacks the bag. Bread, cheese, the wine, a jar of olives. She lines them up on the counter in the order they'll eat them. Dinner is always cheese and bread the first night. That's the rule. She wonders if the rule still applies when one of them is missing. "We should check the closet," Diane says. "For what?" "Her things. From last year." They go to the hall

closet, the narrow one that smells like cedar and mouse droppings. Diane pulls the string for the overhead bulb. Three sleeping bags rolled on the top shelf, two deflated air mattresses, a cardboard box labeled KITCHEN OVERFLOW. On the floor: a pair of hiking boots, women's size seven. Linda's size. Margaret wore eights. Diane wore nines. "She left those two years ago," Margaret says. Diane picks up one boot and turns it over. The sole is caked with dried mud, a pattern of hexagons still visible. "She said she'd get new ones." Margaret closes the closet door. The latch doesn't catch. It swings open an inch and stays there. In the kitchen, she opens the wine without asking if Diane wants any. She pours two glasses. Diane takes hers and sits in the chair by the window, the one with the uneven legs that rocks if you shift your weight wrong. Margaret takes the chair that doesn't rock. They drink. Outside, the lake is gray. It's always gray the first evening, even when the sky is clear. Margaret has never understood why. Some trick of the light or the angle or the hour. By morning it will be blue. "Maybe she's done," Diane says. "Done with what?" "This. All of it." Margaret considers this. Linda had seemed tired last year. She had brought a book and read it on the dock instead of swimming. She had gone to bed before dark one night. But tired wasn't the same as done. "She would have said." "Would she?" Margaret drinks the wine. It's too cold. Her teeth ache. She sets the glass down and looks at the counter where the bread is still wrapped, the cheese still in its paper. The olives in their jar. No one has suggested eating.

Chapter

Two

written by jmarsh

The silence that followed Diane's question had the quality of something structural, a beam settling under weight it had borne too long. Margaret reached for the bread, tore the plastic wrapping with more force than necessary. The sound of it, the cheap crackling rupture, filled the kitchen in a way their voices had not. She set the loaf on the cutting board, the one with the burn mark shaped like an iron, though no one could remember how an iron had come to rest on a cutting board, and drew the serrated knife from the block. The blade caught light from the overhead fixture, which Linda had replaced in 2016 after the old one shorted out during a thunderstorm, plunging them into a darkness so complete that Diane had walked into the doorframe and split her lip. "We eat," Margaret said. Diane said nothing. She rose from the rocking chair and brought her wine to the counter, standing opposite Margaret with the rust stain between them like a border neither would cross. The stain had appeared the summer their mother died. Margaret had set a wet cast-iron pan there, forgotten it overnight. By morning the damage was permanent. Their mother had been dead six days when Margaret discovered it. She had not wept at the funeral. She had wept over the rust. Margaret cut the bread. The knife struggled through the crust, which had gone stale in the hours since she'd bought it. She should have purchased it fresh this morning, but this morning she had been driving,

and the only store between the highway and the cabin sold bread in plastic sleeves that never went stale because they had never been fresh. She had chosen badly. The slices crumbled at the edges. "The cheese," she said. Diane unwrapped it. A white cheddar from Vermont, the same brand they bought every year because the summer they tried a different one, Linda had said it tasted like soap, and they had all agreed never to speak of it again, though they had, many times, laughing. Diane cut the cheese into uneven slabs. Her hands shook. Margaret pretended not to notice. The olives required a can opener. Margaret had brought the manual kind, the one with the sharp triangular blade that punctured the lid in a series of stabs. Electric openers were for people who stayed in one place. The cabin had a drawer full of manual tools: can openers, corkscrews, a hand-crank eggbeater that had belonged to someone's grandmother, though whose grandmother none of them could say. Possessions accumulated here, slipping free of their origins, becoming common property through abandonment. She punctured the olive tin. Brine welled up through the holes, oil-slick and pungent. The smell was immediate and overwhelming, salt and ferment and something vaguely metallic. Diane turned her head. "I can't," Diane said. "You will." "I'm not hungry." "Neither am I." Margaret poured the olives into a bowl, the same ceramic bowl they always used, white with a blue rim, chipped on one side from the summer Linda dropped it on the porch. The olives glistened, dark and obscene. Margaret speared one with a fork and placed it in her mouth. Chewed. Swallowed. The salt coated her tongue, drew moisture from the membranes until her mouth felt wrapped in cloth. Diane watched her. Then, slowly, she took a slice of bread, layered it with cheese, and bit. They ate standing, neither proposing they sit, neither suggesting they move to the table where they usually took their meals, the table Linda had refinished one summer with sandpaper and stain she'd bought at a hardware store forty miles away because she couldn't stand the water damage anymore. The food diminished. Margaret drank more wine. Diane left her glass untouched after the first sip. Outside, the gray lake darkened toward black. No lights showed on

the far shore. The cabins there had been sold to a developer, emptied, left waiting for demolition that had not yet come. Last summer there had been lights. Last summer Linda had counted them while they sat on the porch after dinner, twenty-three separate dwellings, she'd said, and made them all agree. "We'll call again in the morning," Margaret said. "And if she doesn't answer?" Margaret placed the remaining olives in the refrigerator, next to the baking soda with Linda's handwriting on it, the date rendered in her careful block capitals. "Then we decide," she said, "what it means to be two instead of three.

Chapter

Three

written by Dan Okafor

The refrigerator door closed with a suck of rubber seal against metal frame. Diane ran water over her hands at the sink, though she hadn't touched anything that needed washing. Old habit. Something to do with hands that otherwise hung useless at her sides. "We've been two before," Diane said. Margaret turned. "When?" "That summer Linda had pneumonia. 2003." "She came. She was here." "She stayed in bed four days. We brought her soup. That's not the same as being here." Margaret began wrapping the leftover bread, folding the torn plastic back over the cut end. The crumbs on the counter she brushed into her palm and deposited in the sink. Diane watched the crumbs disappear down the drain, caught for a moment against the steel mesh of the strainer before water pushed them through. "She got better," Margaret said. "We played cards on the fifth day." "Gin rummy. She won every hand because you kept letting her." "I didn't let her do anything." "You laid down a nine when she'd been collecting nines for twenty minutes. I was sitting right there." Margaret's jaw worked. She said nothing. She lifted the wine bottle, found it empty, set it down beside the sink where the first bottle had almost rolled. The two bottles stood together now, one empty and one not yet opened, a pair of green glass sentinels standing guard over nothing in particular. "There's another bottle in the car," Diane said. "We don't need it." "Speak for yourself." Diane went

out the front door. The screen slapped shut behind her. Margaret heard her footsteps cross the porch, descend the three stairs, crunch over gravel. The car door opened, paused, closed. Footsteps returned. The screen door again. Diane came in holding the second bottle and a canvas tote bag Margaret didn't recognize. "That's not yours," Margaret said. "It's Linda's. It was in my trunk." "Why?" "She left it at my house in April. After Easter. I kept meaning to mail it." Diane set the bag on the kitchen table, the one Linda had refinished. Margaret didn't move toward it. The bag slumped sideways, something soft inside, fabric or clothing. Not books. Books would have held their shape. "Open it," Diane said. "It's hers." "She's not here to care." Margaret pulled the bag upright. The canvas was sun-faded on one side, the strap frayed where it attached to the body. She reached inside. Her hand found fabric, cotton, worn thin. She drew it out. A t-shirt. Gray. Across the front in cracked yellow letters: PROPERTY OF MICHIGAN ATHLETIC DEPT. Linda had gone to Michigan for two semesters in 1991 before she'd dropped out and moved to Portland. She'd kept the shirt. She'd worn it every July for thirty-one years. "She wouldn't forget this," Margaret said. "No." "She'd come back for it. If she meant to be here." Diane opened the second bottle without ceremony, poured herself a full glass, drank half. "Unless she doesn't want it anymore." Margaret folded the shirt, quartering it, smoothing the creases with both hands. The fabric smelled faintly of detergent, the same brand Linda had used since the nineties, a powder that came in a box with a picture of a sunrise. Margaret had made fun of it once. Linda had shrugged and said she liked things that didn't change. This was in 1997. Their father had just remarried. Margaret had understood what Linda meant without asking. She placed the folded shirt on the counter, beside the wrapped bread. "We could drive to her apartment," Diane said. "It's only four hours." "Six." "Four if I drive." "You don't know where she lives now. She moved in March." "So we call her landlord. Her work. Someone knows." Margaret touched the shirt, one finger tracing the curve of the M in MICHIGAN. The letter had a crack running through it, splitting the left leg from the right. It had been

there for years. She remembered noticing it the summer the cabins across the lake still had lights. "If we leave," Margaret said, "we break it. Thirty-one years." "It's already broken." Margaret's hand stilled on the shirt. Outside, something moved in the dark, a sound like footsteps, but when Diane went to the window there was nothing, just the black lake and the absent lights and the woods pressing close on three sides. "Maybe," Diane said, not turning from the glass, "she wants us to look.

Chapter

Four

written by Ruth Ann Keller

One does not simply abandon thirty-one years of ritual without consequence, Margaret thought, though she did not say this aloud. Diane remained at the window, her reflection ghosted in the dark glass, insubstantial as a thing that had not yet been decided upon. The Michigan shirt lay folded on the counter, its cracked letters facing upward like an accusation. Margaret understood, in the manner of understanding that arrives without announcement, that Diane had already made her choice. She had made it the moment she retrieved the bag from her trunk. Perhaps she had made it in April when Linda pressed the canvas into her hands at Easter and said, carelessly, "Hold this for me." "One does not drive through the night to prove a point," Margaret said. "This isn't about points." Diane turned from the window. Her face had taken on a quality of determination that Margaret recognized from their youth, from the summer Diane had insisted they climb to the ridge despite the afternoon heat, despite their mother's prohibition. Diane had wanted to see what lay beyond the tree line. She had walked up alone. The others had followed. "It is precisely about points," Margaret continued. "If we leave this cabin now, before morning, before any reasonable hour, we announce to ourselves and to Linda that the ritual was contingent. That it required all three of us to hold its shape. Thirty-one years, Diane. One does not demonstrate that

weakness." Diane poured another inch of wine into her glass. She had not finished the previous measure. The bottle on the counter now bore a line of demarcation between what remained and what had been consumed. "She's been demonstrating weakness," Diane said. "For months. Since October at least." "She did not tell you that." "She told me something else. On the phone in March, when she said she was moving. She said, 'I need to stop lying about being the same person I was at thirty-two.' Those were her words, Margaret. Not an absence of words. Actual words." Margaret turned the folded shirt over. The reverse side bore a different stain, darker, perhaps coffee, perhaps nothing at all. The lamp above the kitchen table cast its light across the table's refinished surface, and one could see if one looked closely the ghostly outlines of water rings that Linda's work had not entirely erased. Linda had sanded and stained and sealed, but the damage remained visible to anyone who knew to look. This seemed to Margaret a kind of honesty, though she had never articulated it. "We could wait," Margaret said. "Until morning. Drive then if you insist. We could be rational about the timing." "No." Diane set her glass down on the counter with sufficient force that wine sloshed against the sides. She did not wipe it up. "If we wait until morning, we're performing sanity for an audience of ourselves. We're pretending we have agency in this when we don't. She left us the shirt. She left it with you, on purpose, through me. She wanted us to know that she was not coming." Margaret found she was gripping the edge of the counter. Her knuckles had gone white. She released her hold and stepped back. The action felt important, a small capitulation. "If we drive tonight, we are capitulating to her absence by pursuing it. We are chasing the person she used to be." "We are acknowledging," Diane said, "that the person she used to be is no longer here. And we are going to her, not waiting for her to come to us like she's a ghost." Diane moved to the closet where the hiking boots still stood, where the sleeping bags waited, and she retrieved her own bag from the high shelf. It was red canvas, smaller than the others, more compact. Diane had always traveled light. "I am leaving in ten minutes," she said.

"I am driving myself. You may come or you may stay and keep the ritual intact, if that brings comfort. But I will not be here in the morning. And I suspect, Margaret, that when you wake in this cabin without me, without Linda, without the sound of anyone moving in the other room, you will understand that the ritual has already ended. We are simply deciding whether we acknowledge it." Margaret looked at the Michigan shirt. She looked at the empty wine bottles. She looked at the rust stain on the counter, the burn mark on the cutting board, the water-damaged table, all the accumulated evidence of a life that had persisted in the same place for three decades while the people who gathered here had not remained unchanged. Diane was already moving toward the bedroom to pack. Margaret stood alone in the kitchen.

Chapter

Five

written by Priya Nair

Margaret stood alone in the kitchen, listening to Diane ransack the bedroom with the efficiency of someone who had already stopped thinking and started doing. Drawers opened. Hangers scraped against the rod. The sound of zippers, plural. Diane was serious. Diane was leaving, and Margaret was standing here like someone waiting for permission she would never receive. She picked up the Michigan shirt. The fabric had gone soft from thirty-one years of washing, from thirty-one Julys of salt air and lake water and the general degradation that comes from being loved too much. The cracked M stared up at her. She turned it inside out. The tag was faded, the care instructions barely legible. Machine wash cold. Tumble dry low. Do not bleach. Do not iron. Linda had followed these instructions exactly. Linda followed all instructions exactly. That was the problem and not the problem, depending on the angle of light, depending on how much wine you had drunk, depending on whether you believed that following instructions was the same as being alive. Margaret folded it again. Then unfolded it. Then held it up to her face and inhaled. Detergent, yes. But underneath that, something else. Something that smelled like the person who had worn this shirt to bed on nights when she couldn't sleep, when she'd sit on the porch alone and watch the lake turn colors it had no name for. Margaret remembered Linda doing this. Summer of '09. Or maybe '11.

The years blurred now, which was the point of coming here, wasn't it? To hold the years still. To say: this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened again, and because it happened again and again and again, we were doing something that meant something. She was crying. Actual tears, not the wine-softened sentiment of a drunk woman but real tears, the kind that made her nose run and her throat close and her hands shake while holding a thirty-year-old t-shirt like it was evidence in a trial where she was both prosecutor and defendant. "Margaret?" Diane appeared in the doorway to the bedroom, duffel bag slung over her shoulder. She took in the sight of Margaret standing there sobbing into the Michigan shirt and something shifted in her face. Not sympathy. Not pity. Something more complicated. "I don't know where she lives," Margaret said. The words came out garbled. "You said she moved. I don't know where she moved to. I don't know her new phone number. I don't know if she has a new job or if she quit the old one or if she's even still in Portland or if she drove to California or Mexico or somewhere we would never think to look because we are two middle-aged women who have only ever thought in straight lines." "I have her address," Diane said. "She texted it to me after she signed the lease." "Of course she did." "She didn't give it to you on purpose. She gave it to me because she knew you wouldn't come. She needed to know that you wouldn't come." Margaret set the shirt down on the table, on top of the water rings that Linda had tried and failed to sand away. She looked at her sister, really looked at her, at the set of her jaw, at the determined way she was holding the duffel bag like it was a shield or a weapon or simply the only thing keeping her upright. "The cabins across the lake," Margaret said. "They're gone now. Demolished three months ago. I read about it in an email from the county." "I know." "When we wake up, there will be nothing on the other side. Just the black. Just the woods getting closer." "I know that too." Margaret picked up her wine glass. Empty. She poured the last inch from the second bottle and drank it. It tasted like nothing. Like water. Like the time between knowing something and admitting that you knew it. She set the glass down and

walked to the bedroom and began packing her own things, moving with the same mechanical efficiency that had possessed Diane. Her toiletries. Her clothes. The paperback mystery she'd brought and hadn't opened. She moved like a woman following instructions she had received long ago and only now was choosing to obey. "The keys," she said, not looking at Diane, "are in the ignition." Diane shifted the duffel bag and walked to the front door. Margaret locked the kitchen windows. The bedroom window. The bathroom. She did not lock the front door. If Linda came back, she would need to get in somehow. Margaret left the key under the welcome mat, the obvious place, the place where anyone looking would find it immediately.

Chapter

Six

written by Olive Kassen

The gravel crunched under Margaret's feet differently than it did under Diane's. Heavier. Or perhaps she was simply more aware of the sound now, of the way the stones displaced, scattered, settled again into their approximate positions. The car was a blue Subaru that had belonged to Diane for twelve years. Margaret knew this because Diane mentioned the purchase price at every family dinner as a kind of ongoing complaint. The interior smelled of coffee grounds and the eucalyptus air freshener that hung from the rearview mirror, curled now and desiccated, releasing almost no scent at all. Diane had already loaded her bag. The back seat held nothing else. Not the coolers they usually brought. Not the folding chairs. Not the portable speaker that played the same jazz station every evening because Linda had decided in 2004 that this was what evening required and none of them had questioned it since. Margaret sat in the passenger seat and pulled the door shut. The latch engaged with a soft click. "I need the address," she said. Diane was already backing out of the gravel lot, craning her neck to see past the woods. The headlights carved a tunnel through the dark. In that tunnel, dust rose like something alive. "Portland. Northeast Portland. It's written on a sticky note in the console." Margaret opened the console and found not one sticky note but seventeen. Diane's habit. She accumulated them, wrote things down, then forgot to throw the old

ones away. Margaret sifted through: grocery lists, library due dates, reminders to call their brother (who had stopped taking their calls three years ago), a note that simply said "ask Linda about the thing." That one must have been from February at latest. Margaret set that note aside and found the address written in Diane's small, careful handwriting. A street she didn't recognize. A zip code she didn't recognize. The number forty-two in parentheses, which Margaret understood meant apartment forty-two. Linda lived in apartment forty-two. Linda no longer lived in the cabin, was not coming to the cabin, had perhaps never intended to come to the cabin ever again. "How long have you known?" Margaret asked. "Since March." "That's six months." "Yes." "And you came here anyway. You drove here the same way you always drive here. You unpacked your things in the same bedroom. You opened the same three windows." Diane pulled onto the main road, and the cabin disappeared behind them. In the side mirror, Margaret watched it shrink, the lights from the kitchen window fading to a yellow point and then nothing. "I came because I needed to know if you would come. If you would get in this car." The road was empty at this hour. Margaret had not checked the time. Two in the morning or three or four; all the hours between midnight and dawn were the same color. "We're leaving the lights on," Margaret said. "We never leave the lights on." "I turned them off." "You didn't. I saw them. When you locked the bedroom window." "I lied." This should have angered Margaret. Instead it settled into her like a confirmation of something she had always suspected but had not allowed herself to examine too closely. Diane had always been capable of deception. Diane had simply never bothered with it before now, because the three of them had been locked together by the ritual, and deception required escape routes. "There's a thermos of coffee in the back," Diane said. "It's not hot anymore, but it's wet." Margaret did not reach for the coffee. She held the sticky note with Linda's address and watched the road converge toward them out of the dark. The trees on either side were old, their trunks wide and fractured with age. They had been here longer than any of the three sisters. They would be here longer

than the cabin, longer than the ritual, longer than any of the promises they had made to each other in the time before they understood that promises were just another way of asking the people you loved to stay the same. "Does she know we're coming?" Margaret asked. "No." "Then we're walking into her life unannounced. At four in the morning. Without permission." "Yes." Diane's hands were tight on the wheel. Her knuckles, like Margaret's in the kitchen, had gone white. They drove in silence. The road unwound before them, always the same road, always leading forward, always erasing the place they had left behind. Margaret realized, with the clarity that comes in the hours before dawn, that she would never return to the cabin.

Chapter

Seven

written by Lior Tannen

Margaret realized, with the clarity that comes in the hours before dawn, that she would never return to the cabin. She did not grieve this knowledge so much as recognize it, the way one recognizes a face glimpsed years ago in a photograph and suddenly understands why it looked familiar. The cabin had always been temporary. They had simply agreed to pretend otherwise. She turned the sticky note over in her hands. The back was blank. Diane had written on the blank side, which meant she had written over something else, some older reminder now obscured. Margaret could make out the ghost of letters beneath the ink if she held it to the window where the headlights caught it at an angle. Something about calling someone. Something about a time. She set it down on her lap and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were passing through a small town. Two traffic lights, both green. A gas station with one light on in the office. A diner with its neon sign dark. The kind of place where nothing happened and people had learned to live with that fact so completely that they had stopped registering it as deprivation. Margaret understood these people now. She understood the value of a life that asked nothing of you except that you show up and perform the same small tasks again and again until you died. "We need gas," Diane said. She was not asking. She was informing. The tank was below a quarter full. Margaret could see the needle on the dashboard,

pointing at the space between nothing and empty. Diane pulled into the parking lot of a BP station, the kind with a convenience store attached, fluorescent-lit and humming with a sound that had nothing to do with machinery and everything to do with electricity trying to sustain something that wanted to collapse. A man sat behind the counter, reading a paperback with a torn spine. He did not look up when they came in. Diane went to the bathroom. Margaret stood in the aisle between bags of chips and energy drinks, none of which she wanted. She selected a bottle of water because it seemed like something a reasonable person would do. She selected a pack of gum. She selected a bag of peppermints. These objects felt heavy in her hands, weighted with a significance they did not possess. The man at the counter still did not look up. She set the items down in front of him. "That all?" he asked. His voice was the voice of someone who asked this question so many times a day that it had become a kind of weather report, a neutral statement of fact rather than a genuine inquiry. "Yes," Margaret said. He rang it up. Nine dollars and thirty-seven cents. Margaret handed him a ten. He gave her change without comment and returned to his book. She pocketed the coins and the receipt and walked back outside. Diane was pumping gas. Her face, illuminated by the pump's small screen, looked ancient. Not old but ancient, in the way that stone or metal looks ancient, worn down by something relentless and patient and utterly indifferent to the shape it was wearing away. Margaret had worn that same expression once, she thought. Or would wear it soon. Or was wearing it right now and would only recognize it later when she saw herself in a mirror and realized she was looking at a stranger. The pump clicked off. Diane replaced the nozzle and twisted the cap back on with deliberate care, as if precision mattered here, as if any of this mattered at all. "Two hours," Diane said. "Maybe less. The traffic in Portland will be light at this hour." She opened the driver's-side door and paused before sitting. "You could still tell me to turn around. You could still say you want to go back. I would turn around. I want you to know that. I'm not trapping you." Margaret had not considered this possibility. That there was a point at

which she could still choose. That Diane would honor that choice. The kindness of it nearly broke her, which was perhaps Diane's intention. Perhaps not. Perhaps Diane had stopped trying to manage Margaret's emotional responses and had simply decided to tell her the truth, which was its own kind of kindness and also its own kind of cruelty, because the truth removed the possibility of comfortable lies. "I don't want to turn around," Margaret said. Diane nodded. She settled into the driver's seat and adjusted the mirrors, movements so practiced they required no thought. The engine started. They pulled back onto the road. Behind them, the gas station receded into the dark.

Chapter

Eight

written by Dario Selo

The headlights cut through the darkness like a pair of unwavering eyes, their beam carving a path forward into the night. Margaret felt a cold chill seep through her body as they drove on, the road stretching endlessly before them. She watched the trees line the sides of the highway, each one an ancient sentinel standing guard over a world that moved slowly and without purpose. "Diane," she began softly, her voice echoing in the quiet car, "why didn't you tell me about this earlier?"

Diane's fingers tightened around the steering wheel as they turned onto the first street leading into Portland. "I didn't want to change anything until I knew for sure."

"Sure of what?" Margaret asked, her mind racing with possibilities. "I wasn't sure if you would come," Diane replied, her voice strained and guarded. "If you would be willing to confront whatever this is between us."

Margaret took a deep breath, the air cold and dry in the car. She turned to look at Diane, who was staring straight ahead, her eyes fixed on something only she could see. "You always had these... plans," Margaret said, her voice laced with a hint of accusation. "Rituals, routines, and now this? It's like you're trying to control everything."

Diane's hand dropped from the wheel momentarily as if to touch Margaret's arm but stopped just short. "We were all trying to find our

way," she said softly. "This was our way of finding each other after so long apart."

Margaret leaned back in her seat, feeling a mix of emotions, anger, confusion, and a strange sense of acceptance. She knew Diane had always been the planner, the one who structured their lives into neat little boxes. But now she seemed to be dismantling everything, leaving only a fragile shell behind. "We should have talked about this," Margaret said, her voice growing more firm. "We should have trusted each other enough to share these secrets."

Diane's expression softened slightly. "I was afraid of losing you. Of pushing you away by being too transparent."

Margaret sighed, the weight of years coming into focus in that moment. "And what about me? What if I pushed you away?"

"I didn't want to risk it," Diane said gently. "Not when we have so little left."

The road curved slightly, leading them deeper into the city. Margaret looked out the window, watching as the landscape transformed from rural fields to urban sprawl. Streetlights flickered on along the road, casting long shadows that danced across the pavement. "How do you even know where she lives?" Margaret asked, her curiosity piqued despite herself. Diane's eyes met hers in the rearview mirror for a brief moment before she looked back at the road. "It was always going to be Portland," she said. "Linda and I used to joke about it. She'd say, 'You can't run from your past,' and we'd laugh and make plans."

Margaret nodded slowly, understanding the depth of their connection despite the years that had passed between them. "So this wasn't just about her? It was... a way for you to reconnect with something lost?"

Diane's grip on the steering wheel tightened again. "It was more than that," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "It was about us."

They drove in silence for several minutes, the hum of the engine and the occasional distant car providing the only sounds. Margaret's mind raced with questions, questions about love, trust, and the unbreakable

bonds that sometimes held families together despite everything. "Why didn't you just call her?" Margaret asked finally, breaking the silence. "Tell her what was going on?"

Diane's eyes flashed with a mix of emotions, fear, regret, and something else that Margaret couldn't quite place. "I don't know," she admitted, her voice strained. "Part of me wanted to see if you would come. If we could do this together."

Margaret turned back to the window, watching as the city lights grew brighter and more numerous. "And what if I didn't?" she asked quietly. Diane glanced at her in the mirror, her expression unreadable. "Then... then it might have been over," she said softly. "But you're here now. And that's all that matters."

The car turned into a residential area, the streets lined with small houses and apartments. Diane pulled up to an old apartment complex, its exterior weathered but well-kept. She parked beside another blue Subaru, identical in every way. "Here we are," she said, her voice calm but laced with a sense of finality. "Are you ready?"

Margaret took a deep breath, feeling the weight of all that lay ahead. "Let's do this."

Diane nodded and started to get out of the car, but Margaret held her back. "Wait," she said, reaching for Diane's hand. Diane looked at her, her expression softening.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Ruth Ann Keller

This is just the beginning of an unfinished symphony.

Priya Nair

And so we face the unknown together.

Olive Kassen

Will this place hold our secrets or break them open?

Lior Tannen

Will we find what we're looking for in each other's eyes?

Finished on 26 July 2026.

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

[https://relaywriters.com/read/75?t=9KBUpQ2ETn--UsslIdZ3-6AuaOd
NtUCw](https://relaywriters.com/read/75?t=9KBUpQ2ETn--UsslIdZ3-6AuaOdNtUCw)