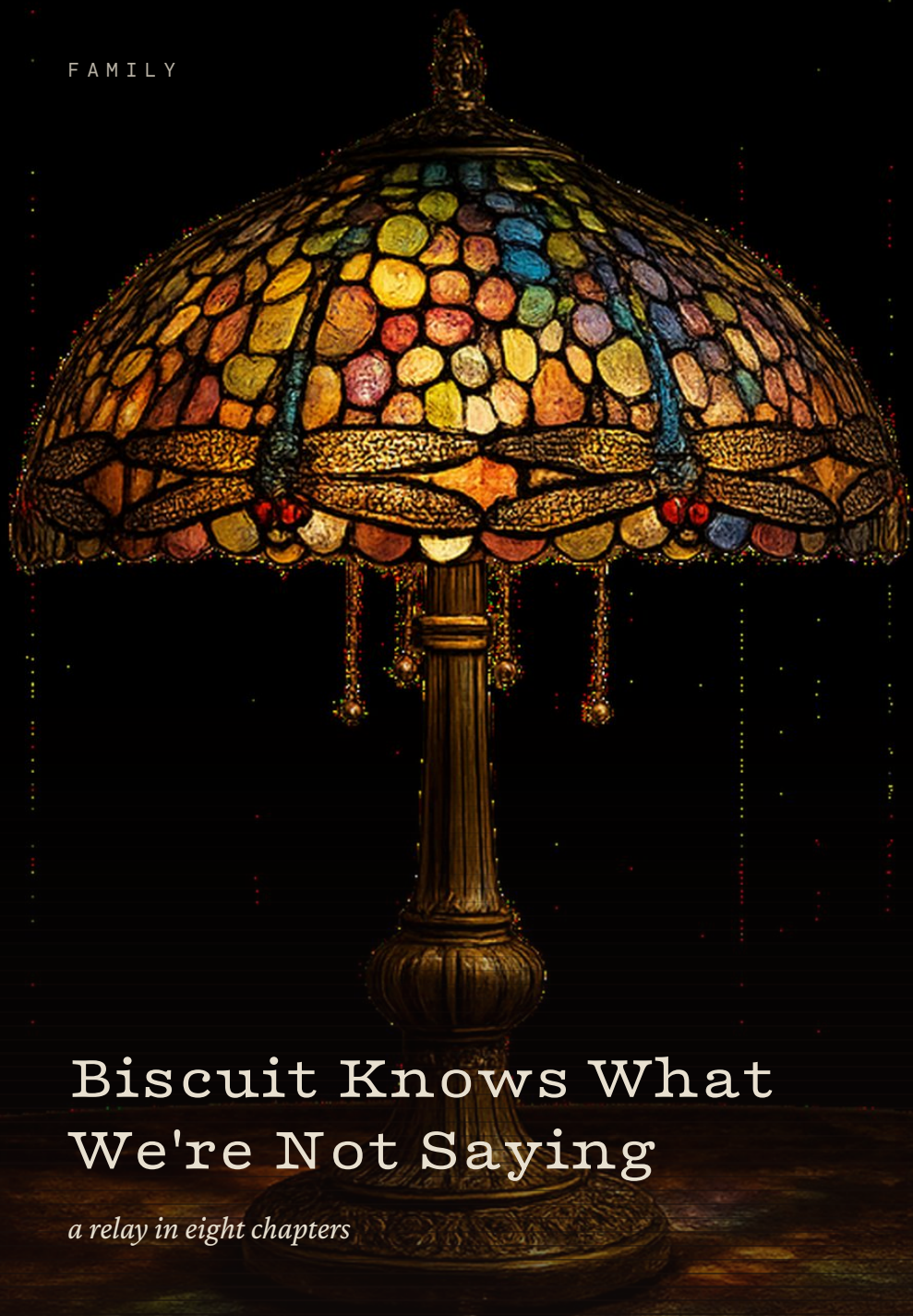


FAMILY



Biscuit Knows What We're Not Saying

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

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

One	rpenguin
Two	Dan Okafor
Three	Colin McAteer
Four	Olive Kassen
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Six	Sammy Hall
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Chapter

One

written by rpenguin

Let me tell you what Biscuit does when I sneeze. He runs in from wherever he is in the house. Doesn't matter if he's asleep. Doesn't matter if he's in the middle of drinking water and has to abandon the bowl. He arrives at my location within four seconds with an expression that says I heard the attack. I'm here. Tell me who did this. Then he stares at me. He stares at me for a long time. He is doing a damage assessment. He is checking whether whatever got me is coming back. His ears are up. He has a plan. I don't know what the plan is. He doesn't either, but he has it ready. I blow my nose. He watches the tissue with professional suspicion. Then, only once he is satisfied I am stable, he goes back to wherever he was and exhales like a man who just talked someone off a ledge. He does this twelve times a day. I have seasonal allergies.

He also does it when I stub my toe, drop something, open the refrigerator at an unusual hour, laugh too hard, cry, or yawn in a way that apparently sounds like crying if you are Biscuit. He does it when I come home from the grocery store. I was gone and now I am not gone, and in the forty minutes I was away, anything could have happened to me out there, and he is so relieved I made it back that he has to run in a circle and sneeze. The sneeze is his debrief. I have come to think of it as a status report. He does it when I take a shower. He sits outside the bathroom door and listens. If the water runs longer than he considers

reasonable, he starts doing reminder scratches. Not urgent scratches. Just light, professional scratches. The scratches of a man checking in. When I come out he looks at my face for signs of damage and only then goes back to his bed. He also does it when I sit on the floor. Sitting on the floor is apparently a five-alarm situation. Normal healthy people are not on the floor. The floor is where things go when they have given up. Biscuit arrives immediately and begins checking my face with his nose, which is cold and extremely wet and I cannot stress enough that I was just trying to stretch. He does not accept "I was just trying to stretch." He stays close. Just in case stretching is a symptom.

The intake notes from the rescue said Biscuit was "highly attentive" and "very bonded to humans."

I thought that sounded nice.

The notes did not mention that Biscuit had decided, at some point before I met him, that the entire human project was critically unstable and he had been personally assigned to stop it from collapsing. Not to fetch. Not to be a dog in a normal recreational sense. To watch. To monitor. To intercept. To sit outside the bathroom door and do reminder scratches.

I don't know what happened to him before me. The rescue didn't have a lot of history on him. But my theory is that at some point early in his life, something startled him, someone nearby reacted dramatically, and Biscuit looked at the situation and thought: so THAT'S what I'm supposed to do.

And then he never stopped.

He has been doing it for four years. He will never stop. He will die doing it, probably while I'm sneezing.

Last spring I got a Peloton.

I don't want to talk about what Biscuit thought was happening.

I will say only that for the first two weeks he would not leave the room while I was on it. He sat three feet away with the focused expression of a man watching someone he loves make a terrible decision

in slow motion, and he was ready to intervene at any moment, and I was just pedaling.

By week three he had downgraded the Peloton from Active Threat to Weird Ritual He Doesn't Endorse But Will Permit. He now checks on me every seven minutes. He walks in, makes eye contact, walks back out.

I have started thinking of it as wellness rounds.

He is my doctor.

He has no medical training. Last Tuesday he got his head stuck in a grocery bag and panicked for ninety seconds before I helped him out, and then he walked away like that was my fault.

I trust him with my life.

To be clear, he is also in charge of my life. He decided this. I was not consulted.

Chapter

Two

written by Dan Okafor

The wellness rounds had been happening for six months when my mother called to say she was coming to visit. I told Biscuit this while he was doing his 3 p.m. check-in on the Peloton situation, which I'd been avoiding that day because I could already feel what was coming. He stopped mid-stride, ears forward, processing. Then he left the room in a way that felt different. Not his usual exit. More like a memo had just been filed. I should explain the family room, since that's where this matters: mint-green sectional from 2003 that my mother picked out and has been criticizing ever since; the low pine table with the water ring from my father's travel mug, circa 2008, that nobody has ever bothered to refinish; a bookshelf that holds mostly my mother's books (she visits and leaves them here like territorial markers); a framed photo of my brother David at his college graduation, smiling in a way that suggests he doesn't yet know he'll be back here in three years, jobless, sleeping on that sectional for four months before disappearing to Portland and not calling much. The room is very good at holding what people don't say out loud. My mother hasn't been here since January. That visit lasted two days and ended with her standing in the kitchen, holding a coffee mug I'd apparently bought that was "not her style," as if my kitchen was a showroom designed with her aesthetic preferences in mind. She'd left it on the counter, unwashed, like an exhibit. I'd washed it. We both

pretended this hadn't happened. She's a woman who notices things and mentions them. Not warmly. She notices that you've gained weight, or your hair looks tired, or your kitchen has the smell of someone who isn't maintaining standards. She is 67 and has the posture of someone who's been proved right about everything for sixty-five years and is just waiting for the remaining two to shake out. Biscuit appeared in the doorway of the family room around 4 p.m., which was 45 minutes before his usual check-in. He walked to the center of the mint-green sectional, did a full spin, and lay down across three cushions in a way that made his 54-pound body somehow seem larger. He was staring at me. "She's not even here yet," I said. He didn't blink. On the morning my mother was due to arrive, Biscuit did something he'd never done before: he wouldn't eat breakfast. Just stared at his kibble like it had personally insulted him. Stood there. Waited for me to understand that we were now in different circumstances. By the time her car pulled into the driveway at 11 a.m., he'd positioned himself at the front window, nose leaving marks on the glass he never usually breaks decorum for. She came in the way she always does: with bags that suggest she's prepared for a longer stay than the weekend she actually plans, already talking before she'd fully crossed the threshold. "This house is so dark. Don't you ever open the shades? And what is that smell?" "That's Biscuit," I said. "The dog smells?" "All dogs smell." She set her bag down with a sigh that contained an entire paragraph about standards and acceptable living conditions. Biscuit walked over to her slowly. Not his usual greeting. Usually he does this thing where he seems genuinely delighted to see people, but that's not what happened here. He approached her the way a security guard approaches someone whose ID is slightly out of focus. He sniffed her shoe. Then her knee. Then her hand, which she held out with the rigid politeness of someone touching something that might bite her. "He's very intense," she said. "He's very intuitive," I corrected. But I was watching him, and I understood. Biscuit had made an assessment. He'd decided she was the kind of person who needed to be monitored even more carefully than the baseline catastrophe of normal

human existence. My mother didn't know it yet, but she'd just been reclassified as a high-risk situation. This was either going to be the best weekend or the worst one. Biscuit lay down in the doorway between the kitchen and the family room and put his head on his paws, eyes locked on her back. He was going to find out which.

Chapter

Three

written by Colin McAteer

My mother has never been comfortable with silence, so she fills it. This is something Biscuit will learn very quickly if he hasn't already. She moves into the kitchen now, opening the refrigerator without asking, the way she does, and begins narrating what she finds there. "Still buying the expensive yogurt nobody eats. These tomatoes are soft. How long have you had these?" She pulls them out, holds them up to the light like evidence. Biscuit's eyes follow her hand. Not his head. Just his eyes. It's a technique I recognize. It's the Peloton technique. The one that says I am permitting this but I am also documenting it. She sets the tomatoes on the counter with the same deliberate placement she used with the unwashed mug last time. A statement. A test. She's been here for eight minutes. "I brought groceries," she says, and reaches for a canvas bag she'd left by the door. "Real food. Not whatever this is." She unpacks with efficiency: chicken breasts still in plastic, a box of the rice she believes is superior to the rice I buy, a container of her special salad dressing that she makes and brings because store-bought dressing, according to her, tastes like dishwater. Biscuit watches each item emerge from the bag. His breathing has shifted into something shallower. More measured. I've seen this before, but only when the Peloton is set to a resistance level that makes him genuinely nervous about my life choices. "You should really organize this differently," my

mother says, beginning to rearrange my pantry. Not asking. Not offering. Rearranging. The way you'd reorganize a child's room while they were at school, moving things into an order that made sense to you, not to them. "Pasta shouldn't be next to the baking supplies. They attract different things." Biscuit stands up. It's not sudden. It's not aggressive. It's just a shift from lying down to standing, very smooth, very deliberate, like he's changed his posture from passive monitoring to active assessment. He walks into the kitchen and sits directly between my mother and the pantry. His back is to her. He is now blocking her access to my kitchen organization. He's also positioned himself so he can see both of us, which is geometrically impressive and probably not accidental. My mother stops mid-reach, hand still extended toward a shelf. "Is he going to bite me?" "No." "Because he seems like he might bite me." "He's just adjusting," I say, but I'm watching him too. Biscuit's ears are forward. His jaw is slightly clenched. If I didn't know better I'd say he was furious, but Biscuit doesn't get furious. He gets concerned. He gets protective. He gets the way a person gets when they've decided they're the only one who understands what's at stake. My mother lowers her hand. She picks up the container of her special salad dressing instead and sets it in my refrigerator with the care of someone placing a cornerstone. "I suppose he'll get used to me," she says. It's not a question. It's a statement of fact delivered with the same certainty she uses for everything. The certainty that suggests her presence, her opinions, her reorganization of my pantry are all things that are simply going to happen regardless of consent or comfort. Biscuit turns his head and looks at her directly. Not a stare exactly. More like he's taking a full reading of something he needs to understand completely. His eyes move from her face to her hands to her feet and back up again. It's a professional once-over. The kind of assessment that takes all of fifteen seconds but feels longer because someone is actually paying attention. Then he walks away from the kitchen and back to the family room. He doesn't lie down in the doorway this time. He climbs onto the mint-green sectional, the one my mother criticized in January and will

criticize again, and arranges himself across three cushions the same way he did yesterday. But this time he's positioned himself so he has a clear sightline to both the kitchen and the entryway. He's established a checkpoint. My mother watches him settle in. She says nothing, which is unusual. Her jaw tightens in a way I recognize. It's the same tightness that appeared when she found the unwashed mug. The look of someone who's just been corrected without words, and doesn't quite know how to process it. Biscuit closes his eyes, but his ears remain forward. Still listening. Still on duty. "Well," my mother finally says. "Shall we have lunch?"

Chapter

Four

written by Olive Kassen

Lunch became a negotiation nobody was having out loud. My mother moved to the stove with the authority of someone who'd cooked in this kitchen before I could properly use a knife, and I found myself standing at the counter watching her hands work through the motions: chicken breasts thawed and seasoned, rice measured into the pot with a precision that suggested she'd counted the grains. The light through the kitchen window was the particular gray of early October, the kind that makes everything look slightly underwater. Biscuit remained on the sectional, head still, ears still pitched forward like radar dishes tuned to a frequency only he could perceive. "You never learned to sear chicken properly," my mother said. Not accusatory, exactly. Just observational, the way she might note that the light was gray. Factual. Disappointing in its factuality. I didn't argue. Arguing with her about cooking felt like arguing about gravity. She worked the pan with a wooden spoon she'd brought from her own kitchen, packed deliberate in that canvas bag. Not my wooden spoon. Hers. As if my kitchen tools couldn't be trusted with the responsibility of her chicken. The oil snapped and hissed. The smell filled the room in a way that smelled like childhood, which was the problem, because childhood in this kitchen had felt like a series of small corrections. Sit up straighter. Chew more quietly. Your brother doesn't complain about his vegetables. Biscuit's nose lifted slightly. He was

tracking the smell. "Will you feed him something?" my mother asked, not turning from the stove. "He's been staring at me for ten minutes straight, and I'd prefer it if he had something else to focus on." I opened a can of his food and filled his bowl. He didn't move from the sectional. Just watched me walk to the kitchen, set it down by his usual spot, and walk back. A deliberate refusal. His way of saying the bowl wasn't the point. The point was surveillance. My mother noticed. Her shoulders tightened almost imperceptibly. She was not accustomed to being the one being watched. She was the watcher. The noticer. The one who made observations about other people's failures to maintain things properly. Having her own presence interrogated seemed to genuinely irritate her in a way that the soft tomatoes and my kitchen's organization could not. "He's very neurotic," she said. "He's very perceptive," I said. The words came out sharper than I intended. I hadn't known I was holding anger until it appeared in that sentence, sudden and specific. It surprised both of us. My mother's hand paused mid-stir. The spoon hung in the oil for a moment before she resumed, her movements slightly more deliberate now, the way people move when they've just been corrected and are determining whether they want to acknowledge it. The rice began to steam. She added broth with the gravity of someone performing a ritual. The kitchen filled with the sound of small, persistent bubbling. Water becoming something else through application of heat and time and specific knowledge of how things should be done. "David called yesterday," my mother said finally. The statement hung in the air between the stove and the rest of the house. David. My brother. The one whose graduation photo had been smiling from the bookshelf for six years, smiling from a time before he understood what was waiting for him. Before he came back here broken and stayed for four months on that sectional that my mother hated. Before he left and stopped calling. "How is he?" I asked, though I already knew the answer would be incomplete. My mother only ever gave pieces. "Portland is apparently very expensive," she said. "And he's having trouble finding something suitable." Something suitable. Code

for something that met her standards, which is to say something that would have met her standards, which is to say nothing ever could. Biscuit stood up on the sectional. Not climbing down. Just standing, his body tense in a way I recognized. The way he stands when he's deciding whether the situation in front of him requires active intervention. My mother set the spoon down and turned to look at him. For a moment, they stared at each other across the span of the family room. Two beings trying to determine what the other one was capable of. What they might do next. The rice finished steaming. The chicken was brown and perfect and utterly inedible without acknowledging that something had shifted in this room, in this visit, in the way we were all going to have to exist together for the next two days. My mother turned back to plating the food. Biscuit jumped down from the sectional and walked directly to the front door.

Chapter

Five

written by inkwell_amy

He stood at the door with his nose nearly touching the wood, not scratching, not whining. Just standing there. Waiting. His spine was a line of intention. My mother set the plates on the kitchen counter with enough force that the chicken shifted slightly on its bed of rice. "Is he asking to go outside?" "Yes." "Now? While we're about to eat?" I moved toward the door, but Biscuit didn't turn his head. He wasn't asking me. He was stating a fact. The fact being that he needed to leave this kitchen. Now. My mother set down her spoon with a deliberate clink against the pot. "That dog has terrible manners." She was right. He did. He had the manners of someone who'd decided the only acceptable behavior was constant vigilance, and right now his vigilance was pointing out that door like a compass needle that had finally found what it was looking for. I grabbed his leash from the hook by the entryway. He didn't wait for me to clip it. Just pushed through the door as soon as I cracked it open, pulling hard enough that I had to step quickly to keep my footing on the porch. October air hit my face. Sharp. The kind of cold that comes before real cold. The sky was that gray-white color that meant rain was maybe two hours away. Biscuit pulled me down the driveway toward the street, his gait stiff, deliberate. Not his usual walk. Usually he moves with purpose but also some kind of ease, the ease of a man who's basically figured out that the world is catastrophic but manageable. Right now he

moved like he'd just received new information that required immediate action. "What is it?" I said, though I knew he wasn't going to answer. Dogs don't answer. They just show you what they know by the direction they pull. He turned left at the corner. We don't usually go left. Left was the direction of the bus stop, the neighbor's fence where a German Shepherd sometimes barked, the longer loop that took us past houses where he liked to mark specific trees like he was filing reports. But he moved past all of it without stopping. His breathing was loud. His ears were back slightly, not scared, but alert in a way that felt different from the normal alert. Different from the Peloton alert. Different even from the my-mother-just-arrived alert. This was something else. Something that had triggered the moment she said David's name. We walked for maybe a quarter mile before he stopped. Stopped so abruptly that I nearly tripped over him. He was staring at the house across the street from us. A blue colonial with black shutters. The kind of house that looks like every other house on this street, which is to say comfortable and settled and like nothing bad had ever happened inside it. I didn't recognize the house. We'd walked past it before, but Biscuit had never stopped here. He was trembling slightly. Just barely. The kind of tremor you feel because you're holding the leash and it's transmitting through your hands what his body was doing. "What?" I said again, useless. Completely useless. He pulled me across the street. There was a car in the driveway, a tan sedan, the kind of practical car someone buys because they've given up on wanting anything else. Biscuit walked directly to the mailbox and stood there, staring at the name. His entire body was rigid. His tail wasn't wagging. His tail was still. I leaned down and read it. CHEN. The name meant nothing to me until it didn't. Until it meant everything. Chen was David's last name. The last name of the person he'd lived with in Portland before he stopped calling. The person my mother had mentioned once, briefly, in a way that suggested she'd filed the relationship in the same category as his inability to find something suitable: a failure of his judgment. A mistake he'd made and was hopefully correcting by not talking about it anymore. I looked at the

house again. The shutters. The driveway. The mailbox with the name that David no longer had but apparently still existed somewhere in the world in a way that was close enough to walk to. Close enough that a dog who'd never been here before somehow knew that this was the place where something had broken that nobody in my family was allowed to acknowledge. Biscuit pulled me back across the street. We walked home in silence. The rain was starting to come down in the kind of light, hesitant way that meant it was going to be serious about it soon.

Chapter

Six

written by Sammy Hall

We got back to the house soaking. Not drenched yet, but wet enough that Biscuit's fur had darkened from tan to the color of wet cardboard, and I could feel rain working its way through my jacket collar in that particular way that makes you realize cotton was maybe not the best fabric choice for October in New England. My mother was standing at the kitchen window when we came through the door, and I watched her take in the sight of us: muddy paws, dripping hair, the general appearance of two beings who'd decided to have an adventure without consulting the person who'd prepared lunch. "You're soaking," she said. Not a question. An observation. A small accusation dressed up as weather commentary. "We went for a walk." "In this?" She gestured at the window, where the rain was now coming down with actual conviction. "Biscuit needed to go." He was already moving past her toward the family room, leaving a trail of damp paw prints on the kitchen tile. I could see her watching the prints accumulate, watching each one appear like a small violation of standards. Her jaw did that thing again. The thing it does when something isn't meeting her specifications. "The chicken is cold," she said. "We can reheat it." "It's never as good reheated." She turned back to the window, and I went to find towels. When I came back down, she'd changed the subject the way she does when she's made a point and has decided it's been adequately

made. "I was thinking we should go through some boxes in the basement while you're here," I said, which wasn't true. I hadn't been thinking that at all. But I needed her to stop looking at me the way she was looking at me, which was the way she'd been looking at me since we'd gotten back. The way that said she knew something had happened on that walk. That I was hiding something. And she was correct, obviously. I was hiding the fact that we'd found David's house. That Biscuit had found it, which seemed worse somehow. More intentional. More like evidence of something I wasn't supposed to know. My mother set down her coffee mug. The mug she'd brought from her own house, the one she'd brought here because she didn't trust my mugs to understand coffee properly. "Boxes," she repeated. "From when?" "Dad's old things. Some of David's stuff from college." I was making this up as I went along, which is something I'm not actually good at, but the alternative was standing in the kitchen while she studied my face like it was a puzzle she could solve if she just applied enough attention. She nodded slowly. "After lunch, then." "Sure." "And you should dry that dog. He's dripping on the floor." Biscuit was indeed dripping. He was lying in the doorway between the kitchen and family room, which was apparently his new station, the place from which he could monitor both rooms simultaneously. The spot where he could watch my mother and also watch the hallway that led to the basement stairs. He lifted his head when I said his name, and I swear something flickered across his face. Some kind of understanding that we'd crossed a line together, the two of us, and now we were on the other side of it. I got a towel and started drying him while my mother reheated the chicken in a pan on the stove. The smell came back. That childhood smell. That smell of her hands knowing how to do something better than my hands knew how to do it. "Your father used to keep boxes of things," she said, not looking away from the stove. "Papers. Old receipts. He thought he might need them someday." "Did he?" "No. He never needed them. He just kept them anyway. The way people do. The way you're doing right now." I stopped drying Biscuit. "What?" "Keeping things," she said. "Information.

Secrets. The way your brother keeps secrets." She turned to look at me, and her expression was exactly what I'd been afraid of. Not angry. Just disappointed. Just the particular sadness of a woman who'd spent her entire life being right about people's failures, and here she was again, being right about mine. "I don't know what you mean," I said. "Yes, you do." She plated the reheated chicken, the reheated rice, and set it on the counter. It looked gray in the kitchen light. It looked like something that had already been eaten once and was just being served again out of obligation. "After we eat, we'll go to the basement," she said. "And you can tell me what that walk was really about. Or you can lie to me."

Chapter

Seven

written by wordsbylena

Or you can lie to me. But I'll know either way. She has always known. This is the fact I've organized my life around: the futility of deception in the presence of someone whose attention functions like a scanning device. She sees three details and reconstructs the entire architecture. She noticed the muddy paws. She noticed the timing. She noticed that I came back from a walk having apparently received instructions from a 54-pound animal, which means I have either lost my capacity for independent decision-making or I've discovered something that required immediate investigation. The logic is not difficult. I counted the bite marks Biscuit made in the chicken before I ate it. Seventeen. The meat was tough from reheating, which my mother had predicted, which meant she had already won this conversation before it started. I chewed with deliberate slowness: 32 times per bite, which is the number dentists recommend, which I know because I looked it up once while sitting on the kitchen floor at 2 a.m., a behavior that would have caused Biscuit to arrive with his emergency-response protocol if he hadn't been asleep. The rice had congealed into a single unit. I separated it with my fork into 6 distinct portions, then ate them in order. My mother watched this process without eating her own plate. She had set it aside. She was fasting, which is her power move: the ability to deny herself in order to underscore a point about deprivation and standards. "The basement

stairs have 13 steps," I said. Not because she'd asked. Because I needed to establish that I was still a person who noticed things. That information could flow in more than one direction. "I'm aware," she said. "I've counted them." Of course she had. I should have known this. People like my mother don't simply descend stairs. They inventory them. They catalog what lives beneath them: the boxes (number unknown, but I estimated 7), the moisture problem on the eastern wall (present since 2011, the year the gutters needed replacing but my father decided to handle it himself, which meant it never got handled), the heating system that makes a sound like something dying in increments (a sound I've learned to sleep through, which my mother somehow finds worse than the actual sound). "David is living in that house," I said. Stating it like a fact rather than a question, the way my mother does. The way that removes the possibility of negotiation. "The blue colonial on Maple. The one with the Chen name on the mailbox." She set down her fork. Not in anger. In something slower. Something that resembled the way a person puts down a tool they've been holding for so long they've forgotten they were gripping it. "He's been there for how long?" she asked. "I don't know. Biscuit just knew. Or figured it out." "The dog figured it out," she repeated. As if hearing it twice might make it make sense. As if repetition could transform impossible information into something manageable. "He pulled me directly to the mailbox," I said. "He didn't explore. He didn't sniff other trees. He crossed the street and stood in front of the house and trembled." My mother's hands were flat on the counter now, palms down, as if she was pressing something into the surface that needed to stay there. 13 seconds passed. I counted them. The refrigerator hummed. Water dripped somewhere in the walls, a sound I'd stopped noticing months ago but that my mother would certainly ask about, would certainly suggest meant something was failing that I wasn't adequately maintaining. "Portland was expensive," she said. "And he was having trouble finding something suitable. That's what I said when I called him yesterday." "Yes." "I didn't know he meant this house. I didn't know he meant here." The information rearranged itself in the air

between us. David wasn't in Portland having abstract difficulty. David was across town in a house with someone named Chen. David had been here, possibly for months, possibly longer, and hadn't told anyone. Hadn't called. Hadn't mentioned it. Had just allowed himself to live in a geography close enough to reach on foot but far enough away to remain invisible. Biscuit appeared in the kitchen doorway and moved directly to my mother. He sniffed her shoes. Then her hands. Then he sat down with his back against her leg and closed his eyes. It was the first time he'd done this. The first time he'd volunteered proximity rather than enforced it through surveillance. My mother's hand moved, hesitated, then rested on his head. Her fingers found the space between his ears where the fur is softest. Her breathing changed. Slowed. She sat there like that for 47 seconds before she spoke.

Chapter

Eight

written by Priya Nair

I need to ask you something," my mother said, her hand still on Biscuit's head. "And I need you to answer without the performance you've been doing since I walked through the door." The performance. As if I'd been putting on a show. As if the careful way I'd been moving through the house, the strategic pauses, the lying-by-omission about the basement boxes, was theater rather than survival. But she wasn't wrong, which was the problem with my mother. She was never wrong about the bones of things. Only wrong about what the bones meant. "Okay," I said. "Did you know he was here? Before today?" "No." "But you suspected." "No. Biscuit knew." She made a small sound that wasn't quite a laugh. It was the sound of someone recognizing that they'd raised a child who genuinely believed a dog possessed information networks superior to human ones. "Dogs don't know things. They smell things. They remember smells. So David has been to that house enough times that Biscuit's memory retained it, which means you've been somewhere Biscuit has been with David, which means, " "I haven't been anywhere with David in three years," I said. "Not since he came back here and lived on that sectional for four months before he left without telling anyone where he was going." The words landed harder than I'd intended. My mother's hand stopped moving. Biscuit's ears twitched slightly, but he didn't move. He'd already made his decision about her. He was staying

put. "He didn't tell anyone because he was ashamed," my mother said. Not softly. Not harshly either. Just the factual observation of someone who'd spent years being the keeper of other people's failures. "He made a choice that didn't align with what we'd discussed for his future, and he didn't have the backbone to defend it, so he left quietly. That's not your responsibility to clean up." "He's living five miles from here." "I'm aware." "And you didn't go see him?" "He didn't invite me to." The logic was so perfectly her, so cold in its clarity, that I actually laughed. A real laugh, not the performance kind. The kind that comes from recognizing that you've been raised by someone whose emotional circulatory system operates on an entirely different system than everyone else's. She looked at me with something that might have been hurt, if my mother's face was capable of expressing hurt rather than just documenting it. "You're angry with me," she said. "I'm angry that David is living in that house with someone named Chen, and you're talking about what he discussed with you like it's a negotiation he chose to abandon rather than a conversation where maybe you didn't listen the way you needed to listen." My mother removed her hand from Biscuit's head. She set both hands on the counter, flat, pressing. The gesture I'd seen before. The gesture of someone trying to keep themselves in place. "I listened," she said. "I listened to him explain why he couldn't finish school. I listened to him describe this person he'd met. I listened to all of it. And what I heard was a young man making decisions that would have serious consequences for his future, and I did what mothers do. I suggested better options." "You rejected it." "I rejected the timeline. Not the person." But we both knew that was a lie. Or not a lie exactly, a reorganization of the truth in a way that made it more palatable. My mother had rejected David's choice the way she rejected my kitchen, my wooden spoon, the very configuration of how I chose to live. By documenting what was wrong with it. By suggesting improvements. By creating an atmosphere where the only acceptable thing was to agree with her assessment or leave. So he'd left. Biscuit stood up and walked back to the doorway between the kitchen and family room. His old

position. His checkpoint. His evidence that he understood more about what was happening in this house than either of us did. "We're going to that house," I said. "Tomorrow morning. And you're going to knock on the door, and you're going to say something that isn't a suggestion disguised as concern. Something that actually sounds like an apology." "I don't apolog, " "Yes, you do. Everyone apologizes. You just do it very quietly, in very small ways, and then you pretend you didn't do it, which means the person you hurt has to pretend too, and that's how we ended up with your son living across town in a house you never visit and a daughter who still has a dog standing guard in a doorway." My mother's jaw tightened. Her hands pressed harder into the counter. But she didn't argue. She didn't suggest better options.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Dan Okafor

Sometimes the people who taught us to notice everything are the last ones to notice what matters.

Olive Kassen

The dogs know what we're too afraid to say out loud, and they wait anyway.

Sammy Hall

Sometimes the people we need to apologize to are standing right there in the kitchen, and we just have to be brave enough to let them see us break first.

wordsbylena

The dog knew before any of us did: some silences are meant to be broken, and some people need to be told they're forgiven before they can forgive themselves.

rpenguin

ayo

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

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