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CONTAINED, MOSTLY, THE FIRE SAID

C H E W Z

A R O Y A P U B L I C A T I O N

CONTAINED, MOSTLY, THE FIRE SAID

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 102

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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FOR THE ONES WHO CAME HOME TO A CHIMNEY

SYNOPSIS

For forty-five years the Kamali family has lived in a glass house on a steel frame, high in the hills above Pacific Palisades. Parviz, an engineer who came from Tehran in 1976 and never went back, built it to stand a hundred years. His widow Āzar still teaches piano at its window. Their son Omid, who makes fake explosions sound real for a living, has moved back in with his wife and daughter to keep the house in the family.

Down the canyon, Captain Ray Maddox has spent twenty-seven years learning that a fire is never really put out. It is only stopped. His father fought the great Bel Air fire of 1961 and never quite stopped shaking.

It is the last winter of 2024. It has not rained in eight months, and the brush on the ridges has not burned in fifty years. The insurance letters came in the spring, to half the street at once. A pleasant man with a good watch has been knocking on doors, asking who might like to sell.

On New Year's night, a small fire breaks out on the ridge above the Highlands, and the firefighters put it out before dawn. Then they are told to roll up their hoses and go home. The ground is still warm. The white flowers on the ridge, which only bloom in summer, are open in January.

And in the gaps between the chapters, something much older than the houses has started to talk.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is fiction wrapped around something that happened.

The Palisades fire began on the morning of January 7, 2025, on a ridge above the Palisades Highlands, and burned for more than three weeks. It destroyed nearly seven thousand buildings and killed twelve people. Another fire, in Altadena, began the same evening and killed more. I have tried to keep the order of events, the weather and the broad shape of what went wrong faithful to the public record: the two wet winters and the eight dry months, the wind the forecasters warned about in words they almost never use, the engines that were not sent ahead of it, the shift that went home, the hydrants that ran dry in the high streets, the reservoir that had sat empty for a year, the gridlock on the one road out, the insurers who had left the hills the spring before, and the buyers who came for the burned land afterward. Because this is a story and not a report, I have kept its numbers loose on purpose. The fire's own interludes carry the history.

On the cause. Federal investigators concluded that the Palisades fire was a holdover: the rekindling of a small fire set just after midnight on New Year's Day, which smouldered underground in the roots of the brush for six days until the wind brought it back. Later reporting, and firefighters' own sworn testimony, described crews being ordered to leave that first burn while the ground was still hot. A man was charged with setting the New Year's fire. At the time this book was written, his first trial had ended with the jury unable to agree, and he was awaiting a second. He is not in this book, and nothing in it should be read as saying he did or did not do what he is accused of.

Everyone in this book is invented. The Kamalis, Ray Maddox, the chief in the clean jacket, the man with the good watch, the adjuster from Arizona and the landscaper whose name Omid finally learns are all made up. Real officials appear only by their titles, the Mayor and the Governor, and what they do here is only what was publicly reported. No insurer is named.

The suspicions in this book belong to its characters. The observations underneath them are real: the letters that came to so many houses in the same season, the lawsuits that followed claiming the insurers acted together, the empty reservoir and the state's finding that a full one would not have saved the high streets, the report that was softened before it was published, and the offers made for land while it was still burning. I have tried to set the plausible beside the absurd and let the reader sort them, as Tara does on her mirror.

The datura is my invention. Sacred datura is a real Southern California wildflower, and the Chumash, who lived on that coast long before any of us, did use it to see what was coming. But no one has ever said that it bloomed on that ridge in January. That is the one thing in this book I have bent on purpose. Everything else was lying in plain sight.

The hills above the Palisades are built to burn. The only question they have ever asked us is how: in small fires we choose, in the cool months, with somebody watching, or in one enormous fire that chooses us.

Chew Z

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Between the chapters of this story, someone else will speak.

They are older than the houses, and older than the people who built the houses, and older than the names of the hills the houses stand on. They have been in your kitchen. They have been in your fireplace, and in the candle on your birthday cake, and in the small blue crown under your coffee every morning of your life. They are warm to the touch.

Listen to them the way you would listen to a witness who has no reason left to lie.

I. THE HILLS ARE WAITING

1. Brush That Is Waiting

Omid

My name is Omid Kamali [oh-MEED kaa-maa-LEE]. My father built our house because of a hill nobody wanted, and I lost it because of the same hill, and in between my family lived forty-five years on a slope that was always going to burn. Everybody knew it. The hill knew it best.

The hills above Pacific Palisades are covered in something called chaparral [SHAP-uh-RAL]. It's a Spanish word, and it means, roughly, *the kind of brush a man on a horse can't get through*. Scrub oak, sage, sumac, a hard little bush called chamise [shuh-MEEZ] that grows so tight you could stand a child on top of it. From the road it looks like green velvet thrown over the ridges. Up close it is sticks and oil and patience. Chaparral waits. It waits twenty years, thirty years, sometimes more. Then it needs to burn, the way a man who has been holding his breath needs to let it out.

Nobody told the hills about the property values.

My father's name was Parviz [par-VEEZ]. He came from Tehran [teh-RAAN] in the autumn of 1976 with my mother, two suitcases, a degree in structural engineering and a letter from a firm in Century City that had promised him a year. A structural engineer is a person who makes sure buildings stand up. My father believed, with a faith I never saw him give to God, that anything could be made to stand up if you did the arithmetic honestly. He and my mother meant to stay three years. Then 1979 happened back home, and the country they had left turned into a country they could not go back to, and three years became the rest of their lives.

They were not sad about it, or if they were, they did it in Persian, where I couldn't follow.

In 1979, the same year their old country closed behind them, my father bought a lot on a hillside in the Palisades Highlands. The Highlands is the high part of the Palisades, up a long road called Palisades Drive that climbs away from the ocean into the canyons. In those days it was new, raw, half-built. The lot was cheap because it was steep, and because the man selling it had watched the ridge above it burn once and said he'd rather live somewhere flat and

boring for the rest of his life. My father told that story at dinner parties for forty years, as a joke about Americans. "He was afraid of a little fire," my father would say, and the guests would laugh, and my mother would not.

My father designed the house himself. Steel frame, concrete footings sunk into the hillside like the roots of a tooth, and glass across the whole back, so that from the kitchen you looked down the canyon, past the rooftops of the village, to the Pacific Ocean. On a clear winter day you could see Catalina Island floating out there like something left behind by a better civilization. He used to stand at the glass with his coffee and say, "A hundred years. This house will stand a hundred years." Then he'd knock on the steel column by the stairs, twice, the way other men knock on wood.

My mother, Āzar [aa-ZAR], taught piano. For forty years children came up that hill every afternoon to sit at her Steinway and be told, in a patient voice with a Tehran accent, that they were rushing. Some of their grandparents had once told her, in slower English than they used with each other, that she spoke very well. She taught their grandchildren anyway. My mother believes that revenge is a thing you do by outliving people and teaching their descendants to play Chopin properly.

Her name means *fire*. I didn't think about that once in forty-six years. I think about it now.

I was born in Santa Monica in 1978, which makes me the first Kamali in several hundred years to be born near an ocean. I grew up in that glass house. I learned to ride a bicycle on its driveway, broke my wrist on its steps, kissed a girl for the first time on its back deck and was caught by my mother through the glass, which is the problem with glass. I went away to college, and came back, and went away to a marriage in Silver Lake, and came back again. I make sound for movie trailers. That's my job. When you hear a building explode in a trailer and it sounds bigger than any building has ever sounded, that's me, or people like me. I have spent twenty years making fake fire sound real.

I will leave you to decide how funny that is.

My father died in the spring of 2024, in April, of his heart, in his chair, looking at the ocean. He was eighty-one. He did not suffer, the doctor said, and I have chosen to believe the doctor, because it's the kind of thing you only get to believe once.

After the funeral my wife and I talked about it for about a week, and then we did the thing everyone does and nobody plans. We rented out our place on the east side and moved into the house on the hill, with our daughter, Tara [TAA-raa], who was fifteen and furious about it for exactly one month, until she discovered that the view from her new bedroom was better than anyone's at school. We told each other we were doing it so my mother wouldn't be alone. That was true. It was also true that the house was mine now, on paper, and that some part of me wanted to stand at the glass with a coffee and knock on the column twice.

So that is who we were, in the last winter. Three generations in a house built to stand a hundred years, on a hill that had been waiting, by my later arithmetic, since roughly the Carter administration.

I should tell you about the weather, because the weather is the first character in this story and the only one who never lied.

The two winters before had been wet. Wet the way Southern California almost never is: storm after storm rolling in off the Pacific, the canyons running brown with water, the hills going so green in spring that people pulled over on the Pacific Coast Highway to photograph them. The grass came up waist-high. The mustard came up yellow. Everything that could grow, grew. We all said how beautiful it was, and it was.

Then the rain stopped.

It stopped in the spring of 2024, around the time we buried my father, and it did not come back. Not in the summer, which is normal. Not in the autumn, which is not. Not in October or November or December. By Christmas it had been eight months with almost nothing falling from the sky, and all of that beautiful waist-high grass had turned the colour of a paper bag, and all the new growth on the brush had dried to kindling where it stood. Kindling is the small stuff you use to start a fire, the twigs and

paper under the logs. The hills above our house had become a very large fireplace, laid and ready, with nobody on duty to say whether it should be lit.

The scientists have a name for this. They call it *whiplash*: very wet, then very dry, one after the other, so the land grows a feast and then bakes it. I learned the word later, in a hotel room, from a television. At the time I only noticed that the hills had gone gold, and that my mother had stopped opening the back doors in the afternoon.

"Too dry," she said, when I asked. "It smells like August."

It was December. I told her she was imagining it.

I have been a sound engineer for twenty years, which means I have been paid to listen for twenty years. I didn't hear a thing.

2. Mop-Up

Ray

Twenty-seven years on the job and I have never once put out a fire.

I want to be precise, because nobody else in this story will be. Firefighters do not *put out* fires the way you put out a cigarette. We take things away from them. We take away their fuel, by cutting a line through the brush down to bare dirt, so there is nothing on the other side to eat. We take away their heat, with water, which soaks up heat faster than almost anything on earth. We take away their air, with dirt, with foam, with wet blankets on a kitchen pan. A fire is three things holding hands, fuel and heat and air, and all we ever do is break the grip. When the grip breaks, the fire isn't dead. It's just stopped. You learn that difference in your first year, and if you're lucky you learn it by watching it go wrong on somebody else's watch.

My name is Ray Maddox. I'm a captain in the city fire department, which is a smaller job than it sounds. It means I ride in the right-hand seat of an engine and make decisions I will later explain to people who were not there. I've been at the same station in the Palisades for the last eleven years, a low brick building near the bottom of the canyon with a flagpole and a basketball hoop and a

kitchen where men with forearms like hams argue about chili. Before that I was all over the city. Before that I was a kid from the San Fernando Valley whose father had also been a firefighter, and whose father's hands shook a little when he held a coffee cup, from something that happened in November of 1961 in Bel Air that he told me about exactly once.

I'll tell you about 1961 some other time. Or someone will.

The part of the job nobody puts on a recruiting poster is called mop-up. After the flames are down and the television trucks have gone home, after the helicopter has flown back to wherever helicopters sleep, you walk the black. That's what we call a burn area: the black. You walk it in a line, with hand tools, with a hose if you're lucky, and you look for heat. You dig out stumps. You turn over logs. You crumble the ash in your fist. The old men taught me to take my glove off and hold the back of my bare hand close to the ground, like you're checking a child for fever, because a hand is the best thermometer ever made and it's free. You can't see fire in the roots. Brush has roots like a nervous system, down and down, woven through the dirt, and a fire can crawl into them and lie there, eating very slowly, a coal the size of your thumb in a tunnel the width of a pencil. For days. Sometimes, in the old stories, for weeks.

It is the most boring work in the world, mop-up. It is also the only part of the job that ever actually finishes anything.

The department knows this. It's in the manuals. It's in the training. Walk the black until it's cold. Then walk it again.

What the manuals don't have a chapter for is money.

That December, the week before Christmas, I stood in the maintenance yard downtown with a friend of mine who works there, a mechanic, and we looked at the engines. Rows of them. Fire engines lined up like cattle in a feedlot, some with their hoods open, some with their tyres off, some stripped of their tools, some just waiting for a part that was on order, or would be on order when somebody approved the order. My mechanic friend told me they didn't have enough people to fix them. He told me there'd been money for mechanics once and then there hadn't. He said this the way you'd describe the weather.

"How many?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Enough that if the whole city caught fire on the same afternoon, you'd notice."

We laughed. That's what you do. Firefighters have the darkest sense of humour of anyone alive except maybe emergency-room nurses and people who work in funeral homes. It's not cruelty. It's a pressure valve. If we didn't laugh we'd have to feel it, and if we felt it we couldn't go back in.

There is a phrase you'll hear on the radio at the end of a fire. The incident commander, the person in charge, gets on and says a fire is *contained*, which means we've got a line around it and it shouldn't get out. Later he says it's *controlled*, which means it won't. Later still somebody says it's *out*. *Declared out*. Those two words close the file. They close the paperwork, they close the overtime, they send the engines home and the crews to bed. They're the most expensive two words in the job, because every time you say them you're betting your whole reputation that nothing is breathing under the dirt.

I used to think the words were a promise.

They're not. They're a guess with a uniform on.

That December the hills around the station were as dry as I'd seen them in twenty-seven years. You could hear it when you walked through the brush, a sound like somebody crumpling cellophane. We had the conversations you have. The weather service had been putting out warnings all month about wind. The old-timers at the station said the same thing they always say, which is *it's not if, it's when*, and then somebody said *when is a long time* and somebody else said *not that long* and then we ate the chili.

On the way out of the yard that day, my mechanic friend tapped the side of an engine with no front wheels.

"Merry Christmas," he said. "This one's yours if you want it."

3. The Letter

Omid

The letter from the insurance company came in the same month we buried my father. I remember because I found it on the hall table under the sympathy cards, and for a second I thought it was another sympathy card, and in a way it was.

My parents had been with the same insurance company for forty-four years. My father had paid them every year, on time, by cheque, and then by computer when I set that up for him and he complained about it for a decade. He had never made a claim. Not once. The house had never so much as had a leak. My father used to say that paying insurance was like paying rent to God: you did it so you would never have to meet the landlord.

The letter said, in the soft, round language these letters always use, that after *careful review*, the company would not be renewing our policy when it expired in the summer. It thanked us for our many years as a valued customer. It suggested we contact an agent to explore our options. It did not say why.

It didn't need to. By then everybody on the hill had one.

The neighbours talked about it the way you talk about a cold going around the office. The family across the street had one. The dentist two houses down had one. The retired film producer at the top of the road, who had once shown my father his Oscar and let him hold it, had one, and told everyone at the mailboxes that it was an outrage and he would be writing to somebody. The letters had come to hundreds of houses in the Palisades that spring, and thousands more across the state, all from the big companies, one after another, like birds leaving a tree. It didn't feel like a plan. It felt like weather. That's the thing about something happening to everybody at once. It stops looking like anyone did it.

Here, in plain words, is what happens when your insurance company leaves you in California.

You call around. The other big companies are not writing new policies in your area, which is an insurance phrase meaning *no*. Some are not writing new policies anywhere in the state. You are

then introduced to something called the FAIR Plan. The name is a little joke the universe plays on you. The FAIR Plan is the state's *insurer of last resort*: a pool that all the big private companies are required to pay into, so that people nobody else will insure can still get something. It is the lifeboat. And it is a lifeboat in the way a door floating in the ocean is a lifeboat.

The FAIR Plan covers fire. Mostly fire. It does not cover a lot of other things that your old policy covered, like water damage or theft or somebody slipping on your steps, so you're supposed to buy a second policy from someone else to fill in the holes, if you can find someone. It costs a great deal more than your old policy. And it has a ceiling. There's a limit to how much it will pay to rebuild your house, a hard number, no matter what your house is actually worth.

Our house, the steel-and-glass house on the hill, the house built to stand a hundred years, was worth a good deal more than that number.

"How much more?" my wife asked, at the kitchen table, the night I explained it.

I told her.

She was quiet for a while. Then she said, "So if it burns, we lose the difference."

"If it burns," I said, "we lose the difference."

"Will it burn?"

"It's steel," I said. "It's concrete. It's glass. My father built it."

Tara was at the table too, doing homework she was not doing. "Glass breaks," she said, not looking up. "When it gets hot. We did it in chemistry."

"Physics," my wife said.

"Whatever. It breaks. Then the fire comes in the hole."

My mother was at the sink. She didn't turn around. She said something in Persian, quietly, to the window, and I asked her what it was, and she said it was nothing, it was an old saying, and I didn't press. I found out months later what she'd said. It was a saying of her grandmother's from Kashan [kaa-SHAAN], the old desert town

in the middle of Iran where her family came from: *The one who builds a house of glass should not keep a stove.*

We signed up for the FAIR Plan. We bought the second policy to fill in the holes. The two together cost almost three times what my father had paid the year before. We paid it, because we could, which put us ahead of a great many people I would meet in hotel lobbies the next winter. Then we did what everybody does after they've paid for protection, which is stop thinking about it.

I'll tell you one more thing about that summer, because at the time it was nothing.

In July, a man came to the door. Well-dressed, pleasant, fifties, a good watch. He said he represented some buyers who were interested in properties in the Highlands, and he'd heard about my father, and he was sorry for our loss. He said that if we ever thought about selling, he could make it very easy. Cash. No inspections. Quick. He left a card with just a name and a phone number on it, no company, and a line of small grey print underneath that I never read.

I told him we weren't selling. He said of course, of course, and smiled, and said the thing I didn't think about again for six months.

"Things change," he said. "That's all. Things change up here."

I put the card in the kitchen drawer with the takeout menus and the dead batteries.

4. New Year's Eve

Ray

On New Year's Eve the city of Los Angeles bans fireworks, and then the city of Los Angeles sets off approximately all of them.

I was on shift. I'd volunteered, because I'm divorced and my kids are grown and there's nothing sadder than a man my age watching the ball drop alone in an apartment in Sherman Oaks, and because the young guys with families should be home with them. That's the other thing about the job nobody puts on the poster. The station is a family, and like most families it runs on who's willing to take the bad shift.

Around eleven-thirty I went out behind the station to look at the hills. You do that on a night like that. You go out and you smell the air.

The sky over the city was going pop-pop-pop, red and green and gold, from the flats all the way to the ocean. Somebody in the canyon had something with real gunpowder in it, and every few minutes it went off with a thump I could feel in my chest. Every one of those is a small fire in the sky, and every one comes down somewhere. I have pulled a lot of dead palm trees off a lot of roofs on the first of January.

The air was dry. No wind yet, not really. Cold, for us. Clear. And there was a smell coming down off the ridge, faint, that I didn't recognise at first. Sweet. Heavy. Like flowers left too long in a vase, or a funeral in a greenhouse. I stood there trying to place it. It's a thing you train yourself to notice, smells. Eucalyptus smells like cough drops. Sage smells like a Thanksgiving turkey. Burning plastic smells like the end of the world. This was none of those.

I walked out to the edge of the lot, where the station backs onto the slope, and looked up. There's a patch of big wild bushes that grow there, and up the whole trail, big soft grey-green leaves and flowers the size of a coffee mug, white trumpets that open at night. Sacred datura [duh-TOO-ruh]. Jimsonweed, the old cowboys called it. Every part of it is poison. I've taken hikers to the emergency room who ate the seeds to see what would happen, and what happened was they saw things, and then they tried to fight a parked car. The flowers open after dark and close in the morning. Moths come to them. They smell like that. Sweet.

The flowers were open. All of them. All the way up the slope, pale in the dark, dozens of them, like a crowd of little white faces turned toward the station.

I remember standing there thinking, *that's not right*. Datura flowers in summer. It blooms in the heat, in July, August. I have never seen one open in January. I have never seen one open in December. I stood there for a long time, long enough that one of the younger guys, a probationer, which is what we call a firefighter in his first

year, still on trial, stuck his head out the back door and asked if I was all right.

"You smell that?" I said.

He sniffed. "Somebody's weed?"

"No."

"Then no, Cap."

I went back inside. The guys were watching the countdown on the TV in the kitchen, the replay from New York, where it had happened three hours before, a big ball of lights dropping over a crowd of people in plastic hats. Somebody had made a cake. I had a piece. It was a bad cake, and I had a second piece, because it was New Year's Eve and there was nobody to tell me not to.

At midnight everybody in the kitchen said happy new year and shook hands like men do, one hand on your hand and the other on your shoulder, and the fireworks outside went crazy for about ten minutes and then started to thin out.

I was rinsing my plate at the sink when the tones dropped.

The tones are the sound the dispatch system makes before it sends you somewhere. Every firefighter in the world knows that sound in his spine. Your body is moving before your brain has finished hearing it.

The clock on the microwave said 12:12.

Brush fire, the voice said. Reported by callers. Near the top of the trail above the Highlands.

On the way to the engine I looked up through the open bay door, and there it was. A little orange glow, high on the ridge, right where the trail runs along the top toward the rock the hikers call Skull Rock, because it has two holes in it like a face. The glow was small. Pretty, almost. Like a campfire somebody had left.

I have been doing this job for twenty-seven years. I know better than to think anything on a ridge is small.

5. The Flowers on the Ridge

Omid

We had an understanding in our family about New Year's Eve. My wife and Tara went to parties. My mother and I stayed home. We had done it that way for three years, since my wife's family started having the kind of New Year's parties that required a coat check, and it suited everybody. My mother didn't like crowds. I didn't like my wife's family. Nobody said so.

So at eleven-thirty on the last night of the year it was just the two of us on the back deck, my mother in her good coat with a blanket over her knees, me with a bottle of wine that cost more than my first car, which is not a boast about the wine. My first car was very bad.

From the deck you could see the whole show. The fireworks went up everywhere, from the village below us, from the flats of Santa Monica, from the Valley over the hills behind, all the way out to where the lights of the city ran into the ocean. They were illegal. Every one of them. The fire department had posted a warning about it on the internet, which is where warnings go to be admired.

"Your father hated this," my mother said.

"Fireworks?"

"The noise. He said it sounded like the war."

I didn't ask which war. My parents had left before the one I knew about. But they had known people, afterward, and my father had gone quiet for a year in the eighties that nobody explained to me, and some things in our family were not talked about in English.

We sat. The fireworks thumped. My mother hummed something under her breath, a piece she used to play when I was small, a nocturne, which is a piece of music written for the night. She has a way of humming that's more like thinking out loud.

Then the smell came down the hill.

I noticed it first because I notice sounds and smells for a living, or at least I thought I did. It was sweet. It was thick. It was the smell of an expensive hotel lobby, flowers everywhere, too many flowers,

the kind of sweetness that tips over into something like rot if you stand in it long enough. It came down off the ridge on a little breath of cold air and settled on the deck like a blanket.

My mother stopped humming. She lifted her head the way deer lift their heads.

"Tātureh [taa-too-REH]," she said.

"What?"

"Tātureh. The flower. The white one." She pointed up the hill with her chin. "There."

I looked. At first I couldn't see anything, just the dark bulk of the ridge above the rooftops of the Highlands, blacker than the sky. Then my eyes adjusted, and I saw them. Up the slope, all along the edge of the trail, pale shapes in the dark. Dozens. Hundreds. White flowers, big as teacups, open to the night, glowing faintly in the light from the city like they had their own small moons inside them.

"Those are open now?" I said. "In the winter?"

"No," my mother said. "They don't open in the winter."

"Then what—"

"They don't open in the winter," she said again, patiently, as if I had failed a very easy question, and pulled the blanket higher on her knees.

We sat and looked at the white flowers on the ridge. The smell got heavier. I remember a thought I had, which I've had a long time to think about since: that the flowers didn't look like flowers. They looked like an audience. Like the faces of people in a dark theatre, before the lights come up, turned toward the stage, waiting for the show.

"In Kashan," my mother said, "my grandmother told us not to go near it. Thieves used it. They put it in your tea, you went to sleep, you woke up with no rug." She laughed, a little. "She also said the old saints used it. To see."

"To see what?"

"What was coming."

"Did it work?"

My mother shrugged, the Persian shrug, which uses the whole face. "The thieves got the rugs."

At midnight all the fireworks in the world went up at once, and my mother held my hand, and said *sāl-e no mobārak* [SAAL-eh no mo-baa-RAK], which is *happy new year*, and I said it back. Her hand was very small and very cold. She's eighty-four. She said, looking up at the ridge and not at me, "We've done this before."

"We do this every year, Maman [maa-MAAN]." It's what I have called her since before I could say anything else.

"Yes," she said. "Every year."

The fireworks thinned out. The sky went back to being mostly sky. I looked at my phone to see if my wife had texted, and she had, a photo of Tara in a paper crown, and the time on my screen said 12:12.

When I looked up from the phone, the ridge was on fire.

Not much. A small bright orange mark, high up, near the top of the trail, right in the middle of all those pale open flowers. Like somebody had struck a match in the back row of the theatre.

My mother didn't look surprised. She looked, if anything, like someone who has come into a cinema a little late and found that the film has already started.

"There it is," she said.

Heard on the Ridge

I am not your enemy. I was your gardener.

Before you came, before the ones who came before you came, I walked these hills every few decades like a man walking the rows of his orchard. I took the old growth, the dead wood, the brush that had died standing up and forgotten to lie down. I left the ground black and clean and warm. And the seeds were waiting for me. You should know this. There are seeds in these hills that will not wake for rain. They will not wake for sun. They sleep in the dirt for fifty years, for a hundred, and they wake for me. For my heat, and for my

smoke. There is a poppy here that only blooms after I have passed. There is a small pale-yellow flower the people here call *whispering bells*, because its dry petals rattle in the wind like somebody saying something very quietly, and it only grows in my footprints. For ten thousand years these hills have been setting a table for me, and I have been coming to supper.

The people who were here first understood this. The Tongva [TONG-vuh] down by the rivers, the Chumash [CHOO-mash] up the coast. They did not love me and they did not fear me. They *used* me. They let me out in small patches, in the cool months, in the wet months, the way you let a dog out into a yard. A little here. A little there. Enough to open the land for their acorns and their deer, never enough to take a village. It was a conversation. It went on for a very long time.

Then you arrived, and you decided I was a crime.

You were very sincere about it. I will give you that. You saw what I did to a wooden town and you said *never again*, and you meant it with your whole heart. For a hundred years you arrested me every time I showed my face. You built roads to reach me and airplanes to drown me. You made a bear in a hat and put him on posters and taught your children that only they could stop me. You were proud. Every year you counted how quickly you had caught me, and every year the number was better.

And the brush waited.

It grew, and grew old, and died, and did not lie down, because I was not allowed to come and lay it down. It stood there dead among the living, year after year, piling up. You would call it fuel. I would call it a debt. Every small visit you refused me went into a ledger somewhere in these hills, and the ledger kept perfect accounts, and the ledger did not care who was in office.

I want you to understand something, before any of this begins. I did not choose the size I came back at. You chose it. You simply chose it very slowly, one small victory at a time, and none of you was in charge long enough to see the bill arrive.

I will be fair to you. It is not only the old brush. My hills need me to visit, yes, but not too often, and never like this. You have been

letting me in too often in some places now, with your cigarettes and your power lines and your fireworks, and a hill I visit every few years does not grow back as brush at all. It grows back as weeds, and weeds are only a faster fuse. So do not imagine the answer is simply *more of me*. The answer was always *the right amount of me, in the right season, with somebody watching*. You had that once. It was called a conversation. You stopped having it.

And you built on the table while it was still set.

I have watched you for a long time. I notice things. It is the only thing I can do between visits. I notice that you build your houses where my winds come down the canyons like water down a drain. I notice you build them of wood, and roof them with things that catch. I notice that you plant beautiful trees against your windows, and the trees are full of oil.

I noticed, this last spring, the postman.

He came up the long road into the high neighbourhood more often than usual. He put a great many envelopes into a great many mailboxes, all the same shape, all the same colour, all from a small number of very large companies. I don't read. But I know the smell of fear in a house, and it changed in a great many houses that spring, on the same few days, as if a wind had come through.

I also noticed, in the summer, a man with a good watch walking door to door.

I am only telling you what I noticed. I am a witness. I am not a judge. What men intend is not a thing I can see. I can only see what they leave for me.

The hills are ready. They have been ready for a long time. The table is set, and the flowers on the ridge have opened out of season to watch, and somewhere below me, in a glass house on a steel frame, a woman whose name is my name is holding her son's hand in the cold.

I did not choose the night. I want that written down, if anyone is writing.

Somebody else struck the match.

II. DECLARED OUT

6. Hot to the Touch

Ray

A fire on a ridge at night is the most beautiful thing you will ever be paid to hate.

We came up the trail road in the dark with the engine grinding in low gear, and the fire sat above us on the crest like a necklace somebody had dropped, a thin bright line of orange beads strung along the top of the hill, glowing and going dim and glowing again as the little breeze breathed on it. Below it, the whole of the city spread out to the ocean in lights. Above it, stars. You could sell that picture. People do.

It was a small fire. Eight acres, maybe. An acre is about the size of a football field without the end zones, so picture eight of those, laid across a steep hillside of brush and grass in the dark, burning slowly, the way a cigarette burns when nobody's smoking it. No wind to speak of, thank God. On a windy night that same fire would have been in the Highlands in twenty minutes, and I'd be telling you a different story.

We did it the way you do it. We ran hose up the trail, hundreds of feet of it, men hauling it over their shoulders like fat canvas snakes, and we fought the edge of the fire where it tried to creep downhill toward the houses. A helicopter came in, which surprised some of the young guys, because they think helicopters don't fly at night. Ours do, when it's calm. It came in low with its big light on, like a lighthouse that had decided to go for a walk, and dropped water on the hottest part of the line, and the water came down through the searchlight silver and slow and hissed where it landed, and a cloud of white steam went up and blew away over the ridge. The probationer next to me said *holy shit*, softly, reverently, like he was in church. That's the right response. I've seen a thousand water drops and I still say it, inside.

By four in the morning we had a line around it. By sunrise it was contained. The incident commander got on the radio and said so, and everybody on the hill breathed out at once.

Then came mop-up.

I want to tell you about January second exactly, because I have been over it so many times since that it has worn smooth, like a coin you keep in your pocket and turn over with your thumb.

We walked the black. That's what you do. Hand tools, a hose still charged, a line of us across the burn going slowly uphill in the cold morning. The ground was grey and black and powdery, like the inside of a fireplace, and the stumps of the burned brush stuck up out of it like the bristles of a burnt broom. And it was warm. You notice that. The ground in a burn the next day is warm the way a bed is warm after somebody has just got out of it.

The probationer found it first. He was working a patch of bigger stumps near the top, old chaparral with thick woody bases, some of it half a century old, and he took off his glove the way I'd taught him and held his hand over the ground, and then he looked up at me with a strange expression.

"Cap," he said. "It's hot."

I went over. I took off my glove. He was right. Not warm. Hot. A little wisp of something that was either smoke or steam came out of a crack in the dirt beside a stump and curled away in the air. I put my hand on a rock, a grey rock about the size of a loaf of bread, and pulled it back. The rock was hot to the touch. The sun had been up for three hours and it was January and that rock had no business being that hot.

"Roots," I said.

He nodded. He'd been listening in training. "Burning in the roots."

"Maybe. Maybe it's just holding heat. Rocks do that." I didn't believe it as I said it. I've said a lot of things I didn't believe on a hillside. It's another of the pressure valves.

We started digging. That's the answer to a hot stump: you dig it out, you open the ground, you spread the coals, you drown them. It's slow and it's filthy and it's the only way. We'd been at it about twenty minutes when the chief came up the trail.

I'm not going to give you his name. He's not a bad man. I've known him fifteen years. He came up the trail in a clean jacket with a radio on his hip and a look on his face I recognised, which is the look of a

man who has been on the phone since six o'clock with people who do not walk hillsides.

He told us to pack it up. Roll the hose. Pick up the equipment. We were done here.

I told him about the hot ground. I told him about the rock.

He listened. I'll give him that too. He listened, and then he said a thing about this being parkland, and there being plants up here that were protected, rare ones, and the people who look after the park being unhappy about us tearing up the hillside with hand tools and flooding it with water. He said the fire was out. He said crews had been over it all night. He said it was contained and controlled and there was nothing more to do here that was worth the damage we'd do doing it.

I want you to hold on to that for a second, because I have been holding on to it for a long time. We were told to stop digging so we wouldn't hurt the plants.

"Chief," I said. "This is a bad idea."

I said those words. I know I said them because I've heard them in my head every day since, in my own voice, which sounds more reasonable in my head than it did on the hill. *This is a bad idea*. Five words. They were exactly the right five words and they did exactly nothing.

He looked at the ground. He looked at me. He said the same thing again, in the same tone, which is how orders get said a second time. And I did what twenty-seven years of this job had trained into me deeper than any manual, which is that when a chief tells you twice, you do it. There's a reason for that. On a fire you can't have a crew arguing. People die when a crew argues. The whole thing runs on doing what you're told when you're told it, and trusting the man above you to have seen something you haven't.

So we rolled the hose.

It took about two hours. We picked up every piece of equipment on that hill. The probationer didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He rolled his line very slowly and very neatly, which is what young

firefighters do instead of arguing, and every few minutes he looked up at the patch of stumps where the ground was hot.

When we pulled out, the clock on the dashboard said 12:12. Noon.

On the radio later that afternoon, the fire was declared out.

Declared out. I told you about those words. They close the file. They close the paperwork. They send everybody home to bed.

The next day somebody called in smoke up there, a hiker, and a crew went up and looked around and didn't find anything and came back down. I heard about it at the station, over coffee, and somebody said *hikers*, the way you'd say *tourists*, and everybody nodded. I nodded. I'd like to tell you I didn't. I nodded.

That's what it looks like, if you were wondering. The end of the world. It looks like a man in a clean jacket who doesn't want to damage some plants, and five men rolling hose very neatly, and a clock on a dashboard, and a captain nodding over coffee.

It doesn't look like anything at all.

7. Particularly Dangerous

Omid

For five days after New Year's there was a black patch on the ridge above our house, like a bruise on a green arm.

You could see it from everywhere. From the deck, from the kitchen, from Tara's bedroom window, from the bottom of Palisades Drive if you knew where to look. A dark smudge up near the top of the trail, surrounded by gold grass and grey-green brush and, still, impossibly, those white flowers, which went on opening every night as if the fire had been a rumour. People on the street talked about it at the mailboxes for about a day. Then they stopped talking about it, because the fire was out. The news said so. The fire department had said so. It had been small, and it was out, and it was a new year.

On the fourth, a Saturday, Tara and I hiked up to look.

This was her idea. She'd become interested in the black patch in the way sixteen-year-olds become interested in things their parents are nervous about. She wanted to see what a fire left behind. I said

it was probably closed. She said it wasn't. She was right; nothing was closed, there was no tape, no sign, nobody. We went up the trail in the late morning, the same trail I'd hiked a thousand times as a boy with my father, him in his terrible white sneakers explaining the engineering of retaining walls to me whether I wanted it or not.

The burn scar was bigger up close than it looked from the house. The ground was grey powder. The brush was burned down to black stumps. It smelled like an old barbecue, and underneath that, faintly, sweet. Tara walked into it in her good shoes, which I pointed out, and she ignored me, which she pointed out.

"It's so quiet," she said.

It was. No birds. Nothing moving. Just the sound of the wind, very light, going over the top of the ridge.

Then she said, "Dad. Look."

She was pointing at the ground near a big burned stump. A thin grey thread of smoke was rising out of the dirt. Not much. A ribbon. You'd miss it if you weren't standing right over it. It came up out of a crack beside the stump and went straight up for a foot or so and then the breeze took it and it was gone.

"Is that still burning?" she said.

"No," I said. "It's out. They said it's out."

"Then what's that?"

I didn't know what that was. I'm a sound engineer. I stood there and listened to it, which was stupid, because smoke doesn't make a sound. I thought about calling someone. I actually took my phone out. And then I thought about how I would sound, calling the fire department to say that I had found a small thread of smoke in the exact place where the fire department had just finished putting out a fire, and that I, a man who makes explosions for movie trailers, felt they should come back and do it properly.

I put the phone away.

"It's probably steam," I said. "From the ground. It's cold up here and the ground's still warm."

Tara looked at me the way my mother looks at me. It skipped a generation and landed on her whole.

"Steam," she said.

"Probably."

We went back down. I thought about the smoke for about an hour, and then I thought about lunch, and then I didn't think about it again until a hotel room in Santa Monica, three days later, when I thought about nothing else.

The warnings got loud on the Sunday.

Here is a thing I learned that week: the weather service has a ladder of words for how bad things are going to get, and the words at the top of the ladder are almost never used. There's a *fire weather watch*, which means *be aware*. There's a *red flag warning*, which means *conditions are extremely dangerous for fire*. And then, above that, rarely, only a handful of times in a decade, there's a phrase that sounds like something a bureaucrat would say about a parking garage: *a particularly dangerous situation*.

On Monday the sixth, the weather service used it.

They said the Santa Ana [SAN-tuh AN-uh] winds were coming. They said the winds would arrive that night and blow hardest on Tuesday and into Wednesday. They said the gusts in the mountains could be as strong as a hurricane's. They said the air would be so dry it would feel like a desert. They said, in the careful way these people talk, that any fire that started would spread *extremely rapidly* and be *very difficult or impossible to control*.

I read this on my phone in the kitchen. My mother was standing at the window. She'd been standing at the window a lot.

"Maman," I said. "They're saying the wind is coming."

"I know," she said.

"How do you know?"

She didn't answer. She was looking up at the ridge, at the black patch and the white flowers. After a while she went into the study, which had been my father's study, and I heard drawers opening. When I looked in later she had taken all the photograph albums off

the shelves, all forty-five years of them, the ones from Tehran and the ones from here, and stacked them on the desk in a neat tower beside a canvas bag. She hadn't put them in the bag. She'd just stacked them next to it, like somebody who has packed for a journey and not yet decided to go.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Nothing," she said. "Tidying."

That evening I checked the cameras. We had six. I'd put them in after my father died, in a fit of something I told myself was prudence and was probably grief: one on the front gate, one on the driveway, one on the back deck looking up the hill, one on the side yard, one in the garage, one in the living room looking out through the big glass. They talked to an app on my phone. You could open the app anywhere in the world and see your house, live, six little windows in a grid. CAM 1, CAM 2, CAM 3. My house as a surveillance feed. I used to check it from work sometimes, for no reason, just to see it standing there.

That night, the wind came.

It came around nine. You could hear it arrive, a long soft roar in the canyon like the sound of a big truck on a freeway a long way off, and then the first gust hit the glass at the back of the house and the whole wall hummed. Hummed. Like a tuning fork. My father had designed that glass for earthquakes, not for this. The palms on the street started to thrash. Something metal went skittering down the road. A trash can, probably. Somebody's patio chair.

At about eleven the power flickered. Off, on, off, on. When it settled, every clock in the kitchen was blinking. The microwave, the oven, the coffee machine, all flashing the same number at me in green and red, the way they do after an outage, when they've lost their minds and have to be told again what time it is.

12:12. 12:12. 12:12.

I meant to reset them. I didn't. It was late, and the wind was loud, and I thought, *tomorrow*.

8. The Holdover

Ray

There's a thing the department does before a big wind, or it used to do. It's called pre-deployment, and it's exactly what it sounds like: you put the engines where the fire is going to be before the fire gets there.

It's not complicated. You look at the forecast. You look at the map. You know which hills are dry and which canyons funnel the wind, because you've been fighting fires in those canyons your whole career. So you take extra engines and you park them there, in the danger areas, with crews on them, ready. You bring in extra people to staff them. And the simplest way to get extra people is this: when a shift ends, you don't send it home. You hold it over. The men who worked yesterday stay on today, and the men coming in for today come in anyway, and for a day or two you have twice as many firefighters as usual. It costs overtime. It is the cheapest insurance in the world.

We'd done it before. I'd done it before. Years ago, in a bad wind, I remember the whole station yard full of engines from other parts of the city, men I didn't know sleeping on cots in the day room, everybody drinking bad coffee and waiting for a fire that, that time, never came. Nobody complained. That's the thing about pre-deployment: when it works, it looks like nothing happened, and people wonder what they paid for.

On the sixth of January, the day the weather service said *particularly dangerous situation*, I waited for it.

Some extra engines went out. A handful. To other parts of the city, the Valley, the hills over Hollywood, places where somebody had decided the fire would be. None came to the Palisades. None came to us. The extra engines that were supposed to be staffed mostly weren't, because the shift that could have staffed them went home. They sent the outgoing shift home.

I asked about it. You're allowed to ask. I called a friend of mine who works closer to the top than I do, and I asked him, carefully, the way you ask these things, whether anybody was going to hold the

shift over, and whether anybody was going to send us some iron. *Iron* is what we call engines.

He said a lot of things, and they added up to *no*. He said the engines were in the yard. He said the ones in the yard didn't have wheels, some of them, or tools, or parts. He said there wasn't the money for the overtime, or there hadn't been, or there might be but nobody had signed for it. He said they had people. He said they had a plan.

"What's the plan?" I said.

"Respond," he said.

I thought that was funny. I still think that was funny. Sometimes a man tells you the whole truth of the world by accident in one word, and all you can do is laugh at it, because the alternative is to drive downtown and start kicking in doors.

The Mayor, I found out later, was out of the country that week. On an official trip, on the other side of an ocean, which had been planned for months, and which had nothing to do with anything, and which I only mention because a great many people were going to mention it very loudly for a very long time. I don't think the Mayor would have held the shift over. I don't think mayors know what a shift is. I just want it on the record that on the night the wind came, the person in charge of the city was somewhere with a different time zone, and the person in charge of the department was somewhere with a phone, and the person in charge of the engine at the bottom of the Palisades was me.

I made chili. That's the other part of the plan.

We watched the weather on the TV in the day room. There was a lady in a red dress in front of a map of Southern California covered in purple swirls, and every time she said *wind* one of the young guys said *drink*, and then they stopped doing that because it wasn't funny anymore. Around nine the first gusts came through and the bay doors started to rattle in their tracks. The flag outside was standing straight out from the pole like it had been ironed that way.

I went to bed around eleven. You try to sleep before a big day. I lay on my back in the dark in the little captain's room and listened to the wind working at the building, finding every seam, every loose

sheet of metal on the roof, every crack under every door. It sounds like breathing, a Santa Ana. Big slow breaths, and then a gust like somebody shoving a shoulder into the wall.

I thought about the ridge.

I thought about the patch of stumps near the top, where the ground had been hot, and the rock the size of a loaf of bread. I thought about roots running down into the dark under that hill like wires in a wall. I thought about a coal the size of my thumb in a tunnel the width of a pencil, lying there for six days, very patient, very small, eating very slowly, the way I'd told the probationer they could, the way the old men had told me.

I thought, *it's out. It was declared out.*

I thought, *a guess with a uniform on.*

I got up at some point. I don't know when. I went and stood in the open bay in my socks and looked up at the hill. It was dark. There was nothing up there. No glow, no spark, nothing but the black shape of the ridge against the stars, and the wind pouring down off it so hard I had to lean into it to stand straight. The white flowers were still open. I could see them, faint, all the way up the trail, trembling in the wind, turned toward us.

When I went back to bed, the clock by the cot said 12:12.

I remember thinking that was the third time that week. I remember thinking it didn't mean anything. Clocks say all kinds of things.

9. Ten Thirty

Omid

On the morning of January seventh the sky was the colour of a dirty nickel and the wind was trying to take the house off the hill.

I don't know how else to say it. I'd lived there my whole life and I had never heard the house make the sounds it made that morning. The glass boomed. The steel frame creaked like a ship. Things I didn't know could move were moving — the heavy outdoor furniture on the deck slid a foot toward the railing on its own and stopped there, trembling. Out on the street, a palm frond as long as a canoe came down out of the sky and lay across a neighbour's car like a

dead thing. The air was full of dust and leaves and bits of other people's gardens, all of it racing west toward the ocean.

It was dry. I mean the air itself. My lips cracked. My eyes itched. My mother's hands, when she poured the tea, had gone papery overnight, and she kept rubbing lotion into them and it kept disappearing.

My wife had gone to work in Santa Monica early. Tara had gone to school. The high school is down the hill, near the village, and it didn't occur to anybody to keep her home, because nobody keeps their kids home for wind. It's Los Angeles. We have wind the way other places have snow. You complain about it, you drive carefully, you go to work.

The clocks in the kitchen were still blinking 12:12. I noticed them when I made coffee and thought, *I should fix those*, and didn't.

I worked from home that morning, or tried to. I had a trailer due — a big dumb action movie, a building coming down in slow motion, three seconds of glass and fire that I'd been layering for a week. I had my headphones on. I had the sound of a skyscraper exploding in my ears, and I was trying to decide whether it needed more low end, more of that chest-thump you feel in a cinema seat, when my mother touched my shoulder.

I took the headphones off. The wind rushed back in, enormous.

She didn't say anything. She just pointed through the glass, up the hill.

On the ridge, right where the black patch was, right where the white flowers were, a little puff of grey smoke was rising.

Small. It looked like somebody had lit a cigarette up there. A single grey feather standing up off the crest. Then the wind caught it and it lay down flat and streamed sideways toward the east, and for a second I thought it had gone out. Then it stood up again, and it was darker, and wider, and at its root, just for a moment, I saw a flicker of orange, very bright against the grey brush.

I looked at the clock on my laptop. 10:30.

I remember thinking, very clearly, like a sentence on a screen: *That's the same place.*

"It came back," my mother said.

"What?"

"It came back," she said again, calmly, and she went to the study and I heard her open the canvas bag.

I called 911. I got a recording. I called again. I got a person, a woman who sounded like she had been answering this call for some time already, and I told her there was a fire on the ridge above the Palisades Highlands and she said *yes sir, we're aware*, and asked me to stay on the line, and then the line did something and I was talking to nobody.

When I looked up from the phone, the grey feather was gone.

In its place was a wall.

I don't know how long it took. A minute. Two. I have gone over the footage since, the camera on the back deck, CAM 3, looking straight up the hill, and I know from the timestamps that it took four minutes from the first puff to the thing I saw next, but four minutes is not how long it took. It took no time at all. The smoke stood up off the ridge, and it was brown now, the colour of a bruise, and it was as wide as the ridge itself, and the wind bent the whole thing over like a hand pushing down on the back of a man's neck, and it lay down across the top of the hill and started coming toward us.

There was a sound. Under the wind. I'm a sound engineer, and I'd been listening for twenty years to fake versions of this sound, and I'd been wrong about all of them. It wasn't a roar. It was lower than that. It was like a train going through a tunnel somewhere under the house, a deep continuous rumbling that you felt in your teeth more than you heard, and on top of it, faintly, a crackling like an enormous amount of cellophane being slowly crushed.

The white flowers on the ridge went first. I saw them. All those pale faces turned toward the house, and then the brown smoke went over them, and then they weren't there.

"Maman," I said. "Get your coat."

"I have it," she said, behind me. She was already wearing it. The canvas bag was over her shoulder, and it was heavy, and I knew

without asking that the photograph albums were in it now, all of them, forty-five years, the ones from Tehran and the ones from here.

"How did you know?" I said.

My mother looked at me with an expression I've been trying to describe ever since, and the best I can do is this. It was the face of someone watching a film they've seen before, at the part they've been dreading, and wishing, the way everybody wishes at that part, that this time it will go differently.

"Get the car," she said. "Get Tara."

On my phone, the camera app was still open. Six little windows in a grid. CAM 3 showed the back deck, the outdoor furniture shivering against the rail, and above it the whole hillside, and above that a sky that had turned from nickel to brown to a deep, grainy, impossible orange, like a photograph left out in the sun for fifty years.

In the bottom corner of every window, in small white numbers, the cameras were keeping time.

Heard in the Canyon

Let me tell you about my wind, since you never ask.

In the autumn and the winter, far away to the north and east of you, over the high cold deserts where nobody lives, the air grows heavy. It piles up there like water behind a dam. And when it is heavy enough, it spills. It pours down off the high country toward the sea, the way water pours downhill, and as it falls it is squeezed, and as it is squeezed it grows warm, and as it grows warm it grows thirsty. By the time it reaches your mountains it has been falling for hundreds of miles, and it has no water left in it at all. It is the driest air on earth. It drinks from everything it touches. It drinks from the grass and the brush and the leaves on your trees, and from the skin on the backs of your hands, and from your eyes. Then it finds your canyons, which run down to the ocean like gutters, and it squeezes through them, faster and faster, the way your thumb over the end of a garden hose makes the water fly.

You call it the Santa Ana. You named it after a saint. That tells me everything I need to know about how well you understand it.

It comes when your hills are driest. That is the part you keep forgetting. Your rains come in the winter, when they come at all, and your wind comes in the autumn and the early winter, before the rains, when everything that grew in the spring has had all summer to die. So my wind arrives at the one moment in the year when the table is most completely laid. This is not an accident, and it is not a punishment. It is a calendar. It has been the same calendar for longer than you have had calendars.

I remember a morning in November of 1961. The wind came down the canyons above Bel Air, which is only a few ridges east of where I am speaking to you now, and the air was so dry that I burned in near silence. The people who were there said afterward that I made no crackle. I simply walked. I walked through six thousand acres and four hundred and eighty-four homes, most of them on the first day, and I will tell you what I ate first. I ate the roofs. You had roofed your beautiful houses in thin cedar shingles, because they looked handsome, and they were the driest wood in the city, laid out across the top of every house like kindling in a tray. My embers rode the wind ahead of me, hundreds of yards ahead of me, and landed on the shingles, and the houses caught from the top down, and your firefighters stood in the streets with their hoses and watched me arrive on the roofs of houses I had not yet reached.

A young firefighter was standing on one of those streets. His hands shook afterward, for the rest of his life, a little, when he held a cup. He had a son. The son became a firefighter too. I have met them both.

Afterward, you learned something. I will give you that. You began, slowly, to forbid wooden roofs. You made a law that said people must cut back the brush around their homes. For a while you were very careful. You were always very careful for a while.

Then you built more houses higher in the hills, and the brush grew back behind them, and you forgot.

I want to tell you what I noticed this week, because I have been lying very quietly in the dark for six days, and there is nothing to do in the dark but notice.

I noticed that the men who dug at me on the second morning were told to stop. I heard one of them say it was a bad idea. I heard the other one say it again, the same words, in the same tone. I heard the hoses being rolled. I lay in my small tunnel, no wider than a pencil, under the root of an old bush that has been growing on that ridge since before the man who ordered them away was born, and I listened to their boots going back down the hill.

I noticed that in a yard far across the city, a great many red trucks were sleeping with their wheels off.

I noticed that on the night the wind came, the men who could have waited for me were sent home to their beds.

I noticed that the one who was in charge of the whole city was across an ocean, and that the one in charge of the whole state was a long way off too, talking into microphones about something else.

I am not telling you that anyone wanted me to come. I cannot see into your hearts. I can only see what you leave lying around, and you left a great deal lying around.

And I noticed, one more thing, and I will tell you because it has been troubling me: the white flowers on the ridge were open. They do not open in the winter. I have walked those hills for ten thousand years and I have never once seen them open in the winter. They were open all week. They were turned toward the houses, like people waiting for a show to begin.

I do not know who they were waiting for.

It was not me. I was already there.

III. THE CAMERAS

10. It Started Up Again

Ray

The phone rang in the station at ten-thirty and a captain from another station said six words I have never been able to get out of my head.

“The Lachman fire started up again.”

That’s what we’d called it, the New Year’s one. The Lachman fire, after a road near where it began. He said it the way you’d say *the dog got out again*. I didn’t answer him. I was already looking out of the bay door and up the hill, and there it was, exactly where I had stood in my socks the night before and seen nothing: a grey feather on the ridge, lying down flat in the wind, and at the root of it a flicker of orange so bright it looked like a pilot light.

The tones dropped a second later. By then I was in the engine.

I want to explain something about wind, because people who haven’t been in a Santa Ana think they understand wind, and they don’t. They think of a breeze that gets strong. This is not that. This is a river of air coming down the mountain, and it doesn’t blow so much as *shove*. It shoved the engine sideways on the road. It picked up the gravel on the shoulder and threw it at the windshield like buckshot. When I opened my door at the bottom of the trail it took the door out of my hand and slammed it against its hinges hard enough to crack the paint.

And it picked up the fire and threw it.

Here is the thing nobody understands until they’ve seen it. A wind-driven fire does not walk down a hill like a line of soldiers. It *jumps*. The wind tears burning pieces off the front of it — bark, leaves, bits of brush, anything light enough to carry — and throws them ahead, a hundred yards, a quarter mile, sometimes a mile, into dry brush or onto a roof or into a gutter full of dead leaves. Each one of those is a new fire. By the time you’ve driven to where the fire was, it’s already somewhere else, in six places, behind you.

We call them embers. It sounds so small. It sounds like something in a fireplace.

We got the engine up as far as we could on the Highlands side. I looked up the slope toward the black patch from New Year's and it was gone, covered, the whole top of the ridge under a moving roof of brown smoke, and under that roof the fire was coming down through the brush faster than a man can run. Not walking. Running, the way water runs when a dam goes. The sound was a freight train in a tunnel. The heat reached us before the flames did, a hot hand pressed flat against my face at three hundred yards.

The probationer stood next to me with his mouth open. I didn't say anything to him. There wasn't anything to say.

I called for more engines. Everybody was calling for more engines. The radio sounded like an airport on Christmas Eve, every voice talking at once, every voice asking for the same thing, and the answer that came back, when an answer came back, was a version of *nothing available*. The planes couldn't fly. The big air tankers, the ones that drop the red powder that slows a fire down, can't fly in winds like that; they'd be thrown into the hills. The helicopters flew when they could, in the gaps between gusts, and then they didn't. For hours, on the worst day of my life, I looked up at an empty sky.

Remember the plan. *Respond*.

We responded. That's the truth, and I don't want anybody reading this to think the men on the ground didn't fight. They fought like animals. They fought with what they had. The problem wasn't the fighting. The problem was that there were six fires in the Highlands and then twenty and then I stopped counting, and there were not enough of us to be in twenty places, and the ones who could have been were at home in bed, or in the yard downtown with no wheels, or across the city waiting for a fire that somebody had decided would happen somewhere else.

At one point, around noon, I stood on a corner in the Highlands with my crew and I watched a spot fire start in a hedge. That's one of those new little fires an ember lights when it lands. I looked at my hose, and I looked at the house behind the hedge, and I looked at the next house, and the one after, and I understood a thing that I had known in theory for twenty-seven years and had never had to know in my body.

We were not going to stop this. We were going to choose.

I'll tell you about the choosing later. I'm not ready yet.

On the dashboard of the engine, the clock was keeping time the way clocks do, not interested. Some time after noon I looked at it for no reason, and it said 12:12, and I remember thinking that the day seemed to have been going on for a hundred years, and it was only lunchtime.

11. Palisades Drive

Omid

There is one road out of the Highlands. It's called Palisades Drive. It curls down the canyon from the top of the neighbourhood to Sunset Boulevard at the bottom, two lanes, sometimes four, lined with eucalyptus and pine and very expensive landscaping, and on a normal day it takes about eight minutes to drive. On January seventh it took most people more than an hour, and some people never finished it.

I put my mother in the car. She sat in the passenger seat with the canvas bag of photograph albums on her knees like a small, heavy child. I backed out of the driveway and stopped at the bottom of it and looked back at the house, because you do. I thought, clearly, *I'll be back tonight*. I thought it the way you think the plane will land.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and buzzed again. Everybody's phone was buzzing. It was the evacuation order, the official one, telling us to leave now, which we had already done, which everybody on the hill had already done, because there was a wall of brown smoke coming down over the top of the neighbourhood and nobody needed a text message to explain it.

Tara's school is down the hill, near the village. I called her. She answered on the first ring, which she has never once done in her life. She said they were letting them go, the kids with cars were leaving, she was going to walk down to the Pacific Coast Highway with her friends. I told her not to walk. She said, "Dad, nobody's driving anywhere," and then she put the phone to the window of a classroom, and I heard it, the sound of every car horn on the Westside going at once.

"Walk," I said. "Walk to the ocean. Stay with your friends. Mom will come for you from Santa Monica. Don't stop to film anything."

"I'm not an idiot," she said, and hung up, and I loved her so much it hurt my teeth.

Then I turned onto Palisades Drive and joined the end of the line.

I want you to picture it. Two lanes of cars, then four, nose to tail, all pointed downhill, not moving. Mercedes and Teslas and minivans and a landscaper's truck with the mowers still on the back. People in bathrobes. People with dogs on their laps and cats in pillowcases and parrots in cages on the passenger seat. A man in a golf cart. An old woman with an oxygen tank. The sky had gone orange-brown, and the light coming through it was the colour of weak tea, and in that light everybody looked yellow and sick, like figures in an old photograph.

And on both sides of the road, the hills were burning.

Not far away. Right there. I could see the flames in the brush on the slope above us, fifty yards off, then forty, moving along the hillside faster than we were moving down the road. Embers blew across the windshield like orange snow. A palm tree at the side of the road caught all at once, from the top down, the dead fronds at its crown going up like a struck match, and the burning fronds came off in the wind and sailed over the line of cars and landed on the other side.

My mother watched it through the window without speaking.

We moved ten feet. We stopped. We moved ten feet. The car ahead of us was a white SUV with a family inside, two little boys in the back seat staring at us out of the rear window, and I made a face at them, the way you would on any road trip, and one of them almost smiled.

After twenty minutes, people started getting out.

It started ahead of us, around a bend. First one door opened, then another. People stepped out of their cars and stood in the road and looked down the hill at the line that wasn't moving and looked up the hill at the fire that was, and they made a calculation, and they started to walk. Then to run. Carrying children, carrying bags, carrying nothing. They left their cars in the road with the doors

open, some of them with the engines still running, and ran down Palisades Drive toward the ocean between the rows of stopped cars.

"Maman," I said.

"I know," she said.

"You can't run."

"No," she agreed. "I can walk."

She's eighty-four. She had a hip replaced four years ago. She walks to the mailbox and back in the mornings and complains about it. And she opened the car door, into that wind, and got out, and stood in the road with the canvas bag over her shoulder and her good coat buttoned up to her chin, and looked at me through the window as if to ask what I was waiting for.

A firefighter came up the line between the cars, walking fast, shouting. He was telling people to leave the keys in the ignition. *Leave your keys, leave your keys.* I didn't understand at first. Later I learned that the abandoned cars had jammed the road so completely that the fire engines coming up couldn't get through, and they were going to bring in a bulldozer to push the cars aside like toys, and a car without its keys is a car that can't be moved. I heard afterwards that the bulldozer came, and did exactly that, and I have seen the pictures: expensive cars shoved into a heap at the side of the road like a child's collection swept off a table.

I left the keys in the ignition. I got out. I took my mother's arm.

We walked down Palisades Drive together through the smoke, an old Persian woman in a good coat and her middle-aged son, among the stopped cars and the running people and the burning hills, and every fifty yards or so she stopped to catch her breath, and while she caught it she looked around at everything with the same calm, watchful expression, as if she were memorising it for a test.

About halfway down, a pickup truck pulled out of a driveway and stopped beside us. A young man, a stranger, Latino, maybe twenty-five, a landscaper by the look of his truck. He said, "Get in, get in," and we got in, my mother in the cab and me in the back among the rakes, and he drove us down the wrong side of the road,

the uphill side, which was empty, with his hazard lights going, all the way to Sunset.

I never got his name. I've thought about him every day since.

At the bottom, on the Pacific Coast Highway, with the ocean on one side and the fire on the other, I found a text from my wife. She had Tara. They were in Santa Monica. They were fine.

I looked at the time. It was 12:12.

12. Soft Hydrants

Ray

I promised I'd tell you about the choosing.

By the middle of the afternoon the fire was in the neighbourhoods, and the thing you need to understand about a fire in a neighbourhood is that after a certain point it stops being a wildfire at all. The brush has burned. What's burning now is houses, and houses set other houses on fire. A burning house throws off embers like a bonfire and heat like a furnace, and if the next house is close enough, and it usually is, the next house catches too. Then that one catches the next. We call it house-to-house. Once it gets going it doesn't need the hills anymore. It feeds itself, street by street, like a line of dominoes that knocks itself down.

So you choose.

You stand at the end of a street with one engine and four men and one hose, and you look at the houses, and you decide which ones you can save and which ones you can't. You look for the ones with a gap around them, a lawn, a driveway, no trees against the walls. You look for a tile roof instead of wood. You look at which way the wind is going. And you pick. You put your water on the house you think you can hold, and you let the house next to it go, and you don't look at the house you let go, because if you look at it you'll see somebody's Christmas lights still up in the window and somebody's bicycle in the driveway, and you'll stop being useful.

There's a word for this in the manuals. Triage. It's a medical word. It's what they do on battlefields, when there are more wounded than doctors, and somebody has to decide who gets saved first. I

always thought it was a strange word to find in a fire manual. I don't anymore.

And then the water went soft.

That's what we call it. You open the hydrant and hook up and you get a good strong stream, and then, a few minutes later, it starts to weaken. The hose goes limp in your hands like a snake that's died. The stream falls short of the roof, then short of the wall, then just dribbles out of the nozzle onto your boots. You check the hydrant. It's open. There's just nothing coming.

Here's why, in plain words, because the arguments about it went on for a year afterward and most of them were shouting. The water for the high part of the Palisades comes up the hill in pipes and gets stored in big tanks at the top, so that gravity can push it back down to the houses and the hydrants. The system was built to fill bathtubs and water lawns and put out a house fire or two. It was never built for hundreds of houses burning at once, with every hydrant in the neighbourhood wide open, and burned-out homes pouring water out of melted pipes into the dirt. The tanks drained faster than the pumps could fill them. When the tanks ran dry, the hydrants uphill ran dry. Simple as that.

And above the neighbourhood, up a canyon, there was a reservoir. A big one. The size of a lake. It had been sitting empty for most of a year, because its cover had a tear in it and the city was waiting to fix it. I didn't know that on the day. I found it out later, like everybody, on the news. Later still, some very serious people wrote a very serious report saying that even if the reservoir had been full it wouldn't have been enough — it would have helped for a while, they said, and then the hydrants would have gone soft anyway, because nothing built to fill bathtubs could keep up with a burning town.

I believe the report. I've read it twice. I also know what it's like to stand in a driveway with a dead hose in your hands, and I'll tell you that a man in that position does not want to hear about percentages.

Around three o'clock I was on a steep street near the top of the Highlands, a street of big houses on big lots with big views, and the

hydrant in front of one of them went soft on us. It was a strange house. Steel and glass. The whole back wall was windows looking down the canyon to the ocean. Someone had built it to last. You could see that. There were security cameras on it, little white ones, under the eaves and over the gate, and I remember standing in that driveway with the hose going limp in my hands and looking straight up into one of those cameras.

I don't know why I looked. It was just there, a little glass eye, watching me fail. I thought, *somebody's going to see this*. I thought, *I'm sorry*. I actually thought those words, to a camera, like a man apologising to a stranger he's bumped on the street.

Then the water stopped, and the pine trees at the side of the house went up like torches, and we got back on the engine and went looking for a hydrant that still had something in it.

The probationer asked me, on the way down, whether the house would make it.

I told him the truth, which is that I didn't know, and that he should stop asking questions like that, because there'd be a lot more houses before tonight, and he couldn't carry all of them.

He's a smart kid. He heard what I meant. He stopped asking, and I could see him carrying all of them anyway.

13. The Cameras

Omid

The hotel was in Santa Monica, four blocks from the beach, and they gave us the last room they had at twice the price on their website, and I paid it without arguing, which is the one thing I did right all day.

It was a small room with two beds and a window that looked out on the back of another hotel. My wife and Tara sat on one bed. My mother sat in the only chair with the canvas bag on her knees. I sat on the other bed with my phone. Through the window, over the rooftops to the north, the whole sky was the colour of an infected cut, and ash was falling on the parked cars in the street like grey snow.

I opened the camera app.

Six windows. Six little squares. My house.

I want to describe this as exactly as I can, because it's the only part of the whole thing I actually saw with my own eyes. Everything else I was somewhere else for.

CAM 1, the front gate, was fine at first. The gate, the plants, the street beyond, all in that strange brown light. Then embers started crossing it. Hundreds of them, left to right, blown sideways by the wind like orange hail, bouncing off the gate and the paving stones, gathering in the corners where the leaves gather. The camera had a microphone. I turned it up. It was the sound I'd heard on the deck that morning, the freight train in the tunnel, and over it the rattle of the embers hitting the metal gate like somebody throwing gravel.

CAM 2, the driveway, showed a fire engine. That was the first thing that made my heart jump. A real fire engine, parked in my driveway, and four men in yellow hooking a hose to the hydrant at the curb. I sat up straight on the hotel bed. I said, "They're there, they're at the house," and my wife came over and Tara came over and we watched them together, four small yellow figures in a small square on a small screen, fighting for our house.

Then the stream from their hose got weak. I watched it happen. I watched it fall short of the roof. I watched one of them, the one in charge I think, older, walk back to the hydrant and check it and stand there. And then — I have watched this recording more times than I can count — he looked up. Straight up, into the camera. His face was black with soot and he was squinting against the smoke and he looked directly at me, through the lens, through the phone, into a hotel room in Santa Monica, for about three seconds.

Then he turned away, and they rolled up the hose, and the engine drove out of the frame.

"Why are they leaving?" Tara said.

Nobody answered her.

CAM 4, the side yard, went next. There were two big pine trees on that side of the house, old ones, my father had planted them when I was a baby, and I watched them catch. They didn't burn the way

wood burns in a fireplace. They exploded. The oil in the needles, I learned later, which is why you're not supposed to plant pines against a house. They went up with a sound the microphone couldn't hold — it clipped, it went to a flat roar of static — and the whole square turned white, and then orange, and then black.

CAM 5, the garage, just stopped. No fire, no smoke. The picture froze on an image of my father's workbench and a box of Christmas decorations, and a little spinning wheel appeared in the middle of the square, and then the words *camera offline*.

CAM 3, the back deck, was the one I couldn't stop looking at. It pointed up the hill, the way it always had, at the ridge where the white flowers had been, and there was nothing up there now but a black slope and a moving river of smoke. The furniture on the deck was burning. The railing was burning. And through all of it the camera kept looking up the hill, calm, as if it were still waiting for something to come down.

At 6:40, by the little white numbers in the corner, the big glass wall at the back of the house broke.

I didn't see it break. CAM 6 was inside, in the living room, looking out through the glass, and I saw the living room fill with orange light, and then I saw the glass go. It didn't shatter the way glass shatters in the movies. I know. I make those sounds. I've layered thirty tracks of shattering glass for a three-second shot. It wasn't like that. It sagged. It bent inward in the middle like a sheet of plastic in an oven, and a crack ran across it, and then the whole wall simply wasn't there anymore, and the fire walked in through the hole.

Tara said, very quietly, "Glass breaks. When it gets hot."

My mother's piano was in that room. The Steinway. Forty years of other people's children being told that they were rushing. I watched it on CAM 6. I watched the fire go across the floor toward it, and I watched the lid of the piano catch, and then the picture went brown and then black and then the little wheel came, and the words.

Camera offline.

That left CAM 3. The deck. Looking up the hill.

We sat and watched it for another hour. None of us spoke. My mother never once looked at the phone. She sat in the chair with the photograph albums and looked at the wall, and every so often her lips moved, and I don't know if she was praying, or doing arithmetic, or talking to my father.

At 7:52, the picture on CAM 3 shook, very slightly, as if something heavy had fallen somewhere in the house. Then the image tilted sideways, slowly, about thirty degrees, and stopped, so that the black hill and the orange sky sat crooked in the square, like a picture hanging badly on a wall.

The numbers in the corner kept counting for another eleven seconds. Then they stopped too.

The last thing my house ever showed me was a crooked view of the hill that burned it.

14. Across the City

Ray

At about six that evening a second fire started on the other side of Los Angeles, in the foothills above Altadena, twenty-five miles east of us.

I heard it on the radio the way you'd hear that a second ship had hit an iceberg. There was a pause on the channel, a real pause, the first quiet in eight hours, and then everybody started talking at once again. The Altadena fire was running in the same wind, the same way, down the same kind of hills into the same kind of neighbourhoods. And every engine they might have sent to us, they now had to split in two. That same night a third fire broke out in the Valley, and the next day a fourth in the hills above Hollywood. For a couple of days the whole city looked, from a helicopter, like a birthday cake that somebody had lit at both ends.

I've been asked since whether it was the worst thing I ever saw. It wasn't one thing. That's what people don't understand. It was a thousand small things, one after another, for forty hours, and none of them stopped to let you take in the last one.

A swimming pool with a family's patio furniture floating in it, and the water steaming.

A street where every single house was gone except one, perfectly untouched, its lawn sprinkler still going round and round.

An old man on a roof with a garden hose, refusing to come down, spraying his gutters with a stream of water that wouldn't have put out a barbecue, while the house next door burned so hot the paint on his side was bubbling. We got him down. I don't know if he thanked us. I don't know if he should have.

A dog walking down the middle of Sunset Boulevard, alone, very calmly, in the direction of the ocean, as if it had an appointment.

Some people didn't get out. I'm not going to write about them. That belongs to their families and not to me. I'll only say that the number was small compared to the size of the thing, and that every one of them was the whole world to somebody, and that for every one of them there's a firefighter somewhere who goes over it in his head at three in the morning, asking whether he could have been ten minutes faster, a street closer, a hose longer.

The Mayor came back from across the ocean on the second day. There was a press conference. There were a great many press conferences. The Mayor stood at a podium and said the right things with a face that looked as if it hadn't slept either. The Governor stood at another podium in another city and said other right things, and also said that somebody should look into the reservoir. Then somebody at the Mayor's podium said the water system was fine and it was simply overwhelmed. Then somebody at the Governor's podium said it wasn't fine at all. The two of them, it became clear over the next few weeks, had discovered that the fire was the other one's fault. I watched some of this on a television in a school gym where they'd set up a command post, the room where the people running the fight sit with their maps and their radios, eating a sandwich somebody's grandmother had made, and I thought, *they're fighting it the same way we are. They're choosing which house to let go.*

On the television, in the corner of the screen, there was a little box that said *CONTAINMENT: 0%*.

It said that for a long time.

Then, very slowly, day by day, the number crept up. Eight per cent. Eleven. Seventeen. Every morning the incident commander stood up in front of the cameras and read out the new number, and every morning the number was higher, and every morning the people who'd lost their houses watched it on hotel televisions and felt nothing, because what did it mean? Contained means the fire won't get out of the line you've drawn around it. It doesn't mean the houses inside the line come back.

On the fourth night I slept for six hours on a cot in the gym with my boots on. When I woke up it was dark and quiet and the men around me were snoring, and I lay there looking at the ceiling, and I said out loud, to nobody, "Bad idea."

The probationer, on the next cot, said, "What, Cap?"

"Nothing," I said. "Go back to sleep."

He didn't. Neither did I.

15. The Offer

Omid

At 11:40 that night, in the hotel room in Santa Monica, while Tara slept in her clothes and my wife sat in the bathroom with the door closed, crying where she thought we couldn't hear, my phone buzzed with a text message from a number I didn't know.

I opened it because I thought it might be a neighbour. It might have been anyone. A lot of people were texting a lot of people that night, checking who had got out, who had a room, who had seen whose house.

It said:

Mr. Kamali, I'm so sorry about what's happening up there. Terrible day. I know this isn't the moment, but I wanted you to know my buyers remain very interested in your property, whatever its condition. All cash, as is, quick close. Please keep my number.

It was signed with a first name. The same first name that was on the card in my kitchen drawer, the one with no company on it and a line of small grey print underneath that I'd never read.

I read the message three times. I looked at the time it was sent. I opened the camera app and looked at CAM 3, which had been dead for almost four hours, the last frozen frame still sitting there: the crooked view of the black hill and the orange sky.

The house was still burning when he wrote to me. It may have been burning when he started typing. It was certainly burning when he decided that this was the right night.

I didn't reply. I sat on the edge of the bed in the dark with the phone in my hand and a feeling I didn't have a word for then and don't have a good one for now. It wasn't anger. Anger would have been simpler. It was the feeling of a man in a room who suddenly understands that the room has another door, and that someone has been standing on the other side of it for a long time, listening.

Things change up here, he had said, in July. On my doorstep. With his good watch.

I want to be careful here. I've been careful ever since. I have no proof of anything, and I'm going to say that more than once. A man who buys land for a living sends a text to a man whose land has just become cheaper. That's not a crime. That's his job. People have been buying burned land in California for as long as there's been land in California and fire to burn it. My own father bought his hill cheap from a man who was afraid of a fire. I know that. I've thought about that more than I'd like.

But I sat there in the dark, and I thought about the letter from the insurance company in the spring, and the letters in the other mailboxes, all arriving together like birds leaving a tree. I thought about the man at the door in July. I thought about a fire that everybody said had been out. I thought about a reservoir the size of a lake with nothing in it. I thought about a firefighter standing in my driveway looking up at my camera with a hose going limp in his hands.

I didn't think anyone had planned it. I want to say that clearly. I'm a sound engineer, not a lunatic.

What I thought was worse, in a way. I thought that nobody had to plan it. I thought that a great many people, each doing his own reasonable job — the insurance man reading his risk tables, the land man reading the market, the chief looking after the protected plants, the city waiting on a contract to fix a tear in a cover — had each made one sensible small decision, and that all of their sensible small decisions had added up, like pennies in a jar, to a burned town. And that some of the people who had made those decisions were going to do very well out of it, and none of them were going to be sorry, because none of them, alone, had done anything at all.

At some point my mother spoke from the chair in the dark. I thought she was asleep.

“Who is it?” she said.

“Nobody,” I said. “A man who wants to buy the house.”

She was quiet for a while. Then she said, in Persian, the saying of her grandmother’s from Kashan, the one about the house of glass and the stove. And then, in English, as if she were continuing a conversation she had been having with someone else for a very long time:

“Your father told one of them no. The first time.”

I didn’t know what she meant. I didn’t ask. It was nearly midnight and my house was gone and I didn’t have room in me for one more thing.

I put the phone face down on the bed. After a while the screen lit up again, under the covers, glowing faintly through the white sheet, and I didn’t turn it over to see who it was.

Heard in the Streets

You think I came for your houses like an army. I did not. I came like rain.

I want you to understand how a house burns, because nearly all of you have it wrong, and it matters. You picture a wall of flame marching down a street and swallowing each house whole. Sometimes. Mostly, no. Mostly I arrive as a shower of sparks, the size of your fingernail, riding the wind a long way ahead of me.

They are called embers, and they are the whole of my trick. They land in the gutters full of dry leaves that you have been meaning to clean. They blow in through the little vents under your roof, which you put there so your house can breathe. They settle into the doormat, the stack of firewood against the wall, the dry bark mulch you spread around the roses because it looked tidy. They find the one gap in the one board. Then the house catches from the inside, quietly, while you stand across the street watching the hills, and by the time you see me in the windows I have been living in your attic for twenty minutes.

Then one house gives me the next. That is the other part you forget. I do not need your hills once I am in your streets. Your houses are close together and full of things that burn, and each one I take throws heat and sparks on its neighbour. I walk from roof to roof. I have been doing it in your cities for a long time.

In 1993, in the autumn, I came down the canyon at Topanga, one valley west of where I am speaking now, and I walked all the way to the ocean at Malibu. Three hundred and eighty-eight buildings. Three people. A few days before, I was in Laguna Beach, down the coast, and took more than four hundred homes there. You wrote reports after that too. The reports said: clean your gutters, cover your vents with fine mesh, keep a ring of bare ground around your walls, do not plant oily trees against your windows, build roofs that do not catch. The reports were very good. I have read over their shoulders. Most of you did some of it for a while.

I want to tell you what I found when I reached the high neighbourhood this time.

I found gutters full of leaves. I found bark mulch against the walls. I found pines against the windows, planted by people who loved them.

And I found your water.

Let me be fair, because I have promised to be. Your water was never meant for me. The pipes in those hills were built to fill glasses and bathtubs and a swimming pool on a Sunday, and to put out a kitchen fire or two on a bad night, and they did that faithfully for sixty years. They were not built for a whole town burning at once

with every hydrant open and every broken house bleeding water out of its melted pipes into the ground. No town's pipes are. When the big tanks at the top drained, the hydrants went soft, and the men stood holding empty hoses. That is simply true, and some careful people have said so in a report, and I believe them.

And I will also tell you what I noticed, because I am a witness.

Up a canyon above the neighbourhood there is a great bowl in the ground, built to hold a lake of water for exactly the kind of day this was. When I passed it, I looked in. There was no lake. There was a torn black skin stretched across the bottom of an empty bowl, the cover that is supposed to float on the water to keep it clean, lying there on the dry concrete like a dead thing. It had been lying there for most of a year, waiting on paperwork.

The careful people say it would not have saved you. Perhaps it would not. Perhaps it would have saved one street for an hour. I do not know. I only know that I came expecting water there, and found a skin.

I noticed other things, while I was in the streets. I noticed a man in a driveway looking up into a camera, holding a hose that had gone quiet in his hands, his lips moving. I noticed the old woman's piano, and I am sorry about the piano; it was the most beautiful thing I ate that day, and it sang a little when I touched it, a long low note from inside, and then stopped.

And I noticed that while I was still in that house, still in the walls and the floor and the piano, a telephone in a hotel room far away lit up with a message about buying the land it stood on.

I was still burning. The land was still hot. I want that written down too.

I do not know what men intend. I have said so, and I will say it again. I only know that some of you were waiting for me, and some of you were waiting for what I would leave behind, and I could not always tell which was which.

IV. ASH

16. The Lobby

Omid

For three weeks we lived in the hotel, and so did everybody else.

You'd come down to the lobby in the morning for the free coffee and there they'd be, the whole Palisades, in borrowed clothes. The dentist from two doors down. The family with the two little boys from the white SUV on Palisades Drive, who'd got out and walked, and who turned out to live four streets over. The retired film producer, in a tracksuit that was clearly somebody's grandson's, carrying his Oscar in a plastic grocery bag, because it was the only thing he had taken, and he took it everywhere now, into the breakfast room, into the elevator, like a man carrying an urn. People who had lived three streets apart for twenty years and never spoken now sat together on the lobby sofas all day, holding paper cups, telling each other what they'd lost in lists.

Everybody made lists. The insurance people told you to. You sat down with a pad of hotel notepaper and tried to write down everything you had owned, room by room, and you discovered, very quickly, that you could not remember what was in your own kitchen drawers. I got to the drawer with the takeout menus and the dead batteries and stopped, because the card was in there, and I didn't know how to put that on a list.

The city around us kept going, which was the strangest part. Twenty minutes south, people were at work and at the gym and complaining about traffic. The hotel had a wedding one Saturday. A real wedding, in the ballroom, with a band. We could hear it from the room, the bass through the floor, a cover band playing a song about dancing in September, and the Palisades people in the lobby sat very still and pretended not to hear it, and the wedding people in their good clothes walked past us to the elevators and pretended not to see us, and everybody did a very good job.

The price of everything went up. Hotel rooms, rentals, a two-bedroom apartment in Santa Monica that had been available at one price on Tuesday was available at twice that on Thursday. There's a law against that in a declared emergency, it turned out, and the Governor said so on television, loudly, and some people

were fined, and the prices mostly stayed where they were anyway, because there were ten thousand families looking for somewhere to sleep and not ten thousand places. The National Guard was on the roads. There was a curfew in the burned areas, to stop looters, and there were looters, a few, and they were caught, some of them, dressed as firefighters, which I still can't think about without a kind of awe at the nerve of it.

And there was the talk.

It started in the lobby on the second day and it never stopped. It went round and round the sofas like the wedding band's song. Everyone had heard something. Everyone had a cousin who knew somebody. The fire was set on purpose, by a homeless man, by a teenager, by a man with a grudge. It was the power lines. It was the fireworks. The fire department had run out of water because the Mayor had cut the budget. The Mayor had been in Africa. The Governor had let the reservoir go dry. The Governor had sent the water to the fish. There were no fire trucks because they were all at the Olympics. There was going to be an Olympics and they needed the land. The rich had been burned out so that the richer could buy in.

And some of it was worse than that. A man in a golf shirt at the breakfast buffet told a table of us, with great seriousness, that he had seen a video proving the fire was started by a beam from a satellite, and that you could tell because some houses had burned and the trees beside them hadn't, and because the cars had melted in a funny way, and because the blue things had survived. I didn't know what the blue things were. He explained that the government was using a laser that couldn't burn anything blue, and that was why a house with a blue roof was still standing, and he showed us a picture on his phone of a house with a blue roof, still standing.

Tara listened to this with a face I'd never seen on her, a face of pure, clinical interest, like a biologist watching a new kind of insect. When the man had gone to get more eggs she leaned over and said to me, quietly, "Dad. That's not how any of that works."

"No," I said.

"But some of the other stuff," she said. "Some of it's kind of true, isn't it."

That afternoon she took the pad of hotel notepaper and a pack of sticky notes she'd bought at the pharmacy downstairs, and she began to build something on the long mirror over the dresser in our room. By the end of the week it covered the whole mirror and part of the wall.

17. Seventeen Per Cent

Ray

A fire this size doesn't end. It gets tired.

We worked it for three weeks. Not me the whole time — nobody works a fire for three weeks without sleep, though some of the men tried — but in shifts, twenty-four on and twenty-four off, then forty-eight, then whatever the schedule said that week. It moved north, into the mountains, away from the houses, and a different kind of fight began up there, a slow, slogging, ugly fight on steep ground. We cut line, which means scraping a strip of hillside down to bare dirt so the fire has nothing to cross. We burned out, which means setting small fires on purpose inside that line to eat the brush before the big fire can. And we walked the black. Men came from all over the country. Men came from other countries. There were crews from Mexico and Canada in the same camp, eating the same bad eggs. That was a good thing to see. I want it on the record that there was a good thing.

Every morning, the number. Seventeen per cent contained. Twenty-two. Thirty-one.

I kept thinking about that number. It's a real measurement, it's not nothing — it means how much of the fire's edge has a line around it that we trust. But on the television it had become something else. People watched it like a thermometer on a sick child. Thirty-one per cent. They'd say it to each other in the grocery store. *It's at thirty-one*. As if when it reached a hundred, something would be over.

I'll tell you what a hundred per cent means. It means the edge is held. That's all. The inside of it is still there. All of it. Every street.

On the ninth day I was in the command post, at the long tables in the school gym where the maps were, when the chief came through. My chief. The one from the ridge, in the clean jacket. He'd been in the command post the whole time, doing whatever chiefs do, which I'm not being sarcastic about; somebody has to hold the phone. He came past my table with two other men and a clipboard, and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and he looked away. Not quickly. Slowly, the way a man looks away from something on a road he doesn't want to have seen.

We never spoke about it. Not once, in all the weeks after. I know a lot of the other men knew, because men talk, and firefighters talk more than most. There were texts going round within days. *Remember the Lachman. Remember the hot spots.* The probationer showed me one on his phone, from somebody I didn't know, at a station across the city. *Heard they left it smoking.* That's how it gets out. Not in a report. In a text between two tired men at three in the morning.

The department's official line, when anybody asked, which the newspapers were beginning to do, was that whatever might have been under that hill had been *undetectable*. That was the word. Undetectable.

I thought about that word a great deal.

I thought about my hand over the ground. I thought about the rock the size of a loaf of bread. I thought about the thin grey thread coming up out of the crack beside the stump.

I thought: *it was detectable. I detected it. I detected it with my hand, which is free, and with my mouth, which said five words, and then I rolled up the hose.*

A reporter caught me once, in the parking lot of the command post, a young woman with a microphone and a cameraman behind her. She asked me if I'd worked the New Year's fire. I said I'd worked a lot of fires. She asked me if the New Year's fire had been fully put out. I said the department had released a statement about that. She said, "I'm not asking the department, I'm asking you."

I said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I've got to go."

She looked at me for a long moment. She was about the probationer's age. Then she lowered the microphone and said, not to the camera, just to me: "Okay. But somebody should."

She was right. I got in my truck.

The number crept up. Forty-nine per cent. Sixty. Seventy-seven. Some rain came, a little, at the end of January, the first rain in nine months, too late to matter and just in time to turn the ash on the hills into a grey slurry that ran down into the streets.

On the last day of the month the incident commander stood up and said the magic number. A hundred per cent. Contained.

Everybody clapped. I clapped. We were so tired. And that night on the television, over the pictures of the burned streets, the little box in the corner of the screen said *CONTAINMENT: 100%*, and I sat in my apartment in Sherman Oaks and looked at it and laughed out loud, alone, for a long time, until it wasn't laughing anymore.

Contained. Mostly.

18. The Adjuster

Omid

Here is what I learned about the FAIR Plan, in the hotel room, over three weeks, on hold.

I learned that when a whole town burns in a single day, everybody calls the insurance company at once, and the insurance company, which is a building full of people in an office park somewhere, discovers what the fire department discovered, which is that there are not enough of them. I learned the hold music, which was classical, and which was, I swear to God, a Chopin nocturne, played badly, on a synthesiser, on a loop. My mother heard it once over my shoulder and said, "She's rushing," and went back to her chair.

I learned the ceiling. We had known about it, my wife and I, at the kitchen table in the summer, as a number on a piece of paper. Now it was a number with a house on the other side of it. The FAIR Plan would pay up to its limit to rebuild, and not a dollar more, no matter what it would actually cost to rebuild a steel-and-glass house on a hillside in a town where ten thousand other people were also trying

to hire the same contractors. The second policy we'd bought, to fill in the holes, filled in some of the holes. The difference between what we'd get and what we'd lost was a number I wrote down on the hotel notepad and then tore off and folded in half, so I wouldn't have to look at it.

We were lucky. I want to say that. We could pay for the hotel. We had the other apartment on the east side, rented to strangers, whom we'd have to ask to leave, which is its own small cruelty. There were people in that lobby who'd been dropped by their insurance company in the summer and hadn't been able to afford the FAIR Plan at all, and had nothing. There were retired people living on pensions in houses they'd bought in 1972, worth millions on paper and not a penny in the bank. The dentist's wife said to me by the coffee machine, very calmly, "We're house-rich and cash-dead," and laughed, and then walked out into the parking lot and stood there for a long time.

The adjuster, when I finally got one, was a kind, exhausted man working out of his car. He'd driven in from Arizona. He had forty-one claims, he told me, just in the Highlands, and more in Altadena, and he hadn't been home in two weeks. He told me what I'd need: photographs of everything, receipts for everything, a list of everything. He asked if I had photographs of the inside of the house from before.

I said I had security cameras.

"That's something," he said. "Most people don't have anything. You'd be amazed. People don't photograph their own lives."

Within the week, the Governor signed an order saying that nobody could make an offer nobody had asked for, to buy land in the burned areas for less than it was worth, for three months. Somebody had noticed. Somebody had been getting texts. The lobby cheered when it came on the television. The next morning I realised the man with the good watch had stopped texting me.

I told Tara. She wrote it on a sticky note and put it on the mirror.

By then the mirror was something to see. She'd put the house in the middle — a sticky note that said HOUSE, with a drawing of it, the steel and glass, surprisingly good — and around it, in a circle,

everything else. INSURANCE LETTERS (SPRING). THE MAN W/ THE WATCH (JULY). NEW YEAR'S FIRE (SAME SPOT!!). SMOKE (JAN 4 — "STEAM"). She'd put that one near the middle. She didn't look at me when she did it. RESERVOIR (EMPTY). HYDRANTS (SOFT). NO EXTRA ENGINES. MAYOR (AFRICA). GOVERNOR (TV). TEXT (WHILE BURNING). ORDER (NO LOWBALLING) → TEXTS STOP.

She'd connected them with lines drawn in the hotel's ballpoint pen, straight onto the mirror, which I'd have to explain at checkout.

In a separate corner, far from the others, she'd made a smaller circle, labelled NONSENSE, and in it she'd put LASERS and BLUE ROOFS and OLYMPICS and a sticky note that just said *THE EGG MAN*.

"You're sorting them," I said.

"Some of these are things that happened," she said. "Some of these are things people made up because the things that happened aren't a good enough story." She tapped the big circle. "These happened. I checked. The reservoir really was empty. Those texts really came. The insurance companies really left." She tapped the smaller circle. "These didn't. People want a villain. Somebody with a laser. It's easier."

"And the big one?" I said. "What does it add up to?"

She stood back and looked at it for a long time, her arms folded, sixteen years old, in a borrowed sweatshirt, in a hotel room, in front of a mirror full of her own handwriting.

"I don't know," she said. "That's the scary part. I think maybe it doesn't add up to anybody. I think maybe it just adds up."

I've never heard it put better. I've heard lawyers try.

Because there were lawyers by then. Of course there were. A group of families from the Palisades and from Altadena had got together with a firm downtown, and there was a meeting on a video call that I sat in on, from the hotel bed, with forty other small squares of forty other hotel rooms. The lawyer explained that they were going to sue the insurance companies. They were going to argue that the big companies had not simply decided, each one alone, to stop

covering the hills — that they had done it together, all at the same time, like a flock, so that everybody would be pushed onto the FAIR Plan, which the companies themselves were required to pay into and which charged more for less. He said there was a word for companies agreeing together to do something that hurts their customers, and that the word was illegal.

Somebody asked him if he could prove it.

He smiled the way lawyers smile. He said that was what the courts were for.

Afterwards I went and stood in front of Tara's mirror and found the note that said INSURANCE LETTERS (SPRING), and under it, in small letters, she'd written: *everyone's at once. why?*

19. What Everybody Knows

Ray

After a big fire, everybody becomes a fire expert. I've been through it before. This time it was worse, because this time there were telephones.

I'd come home from a shift and sit on the couch and look at my phone and there it would be, the whole internet, explaining my job to me. There were videos. There were videos of videos. There was a man with a very clean kitchen and a whiteboard who explained, for forty minutes, how the fires had been set by a secret government weapon. His proof was that some houses had burned to the ground while the trees in their front yards were still green, and a fire couldn't do that, he said, unless it was a laser.

I'll tell you what I would have told him, if he'd asked me instead of the whiteboard.

A house doesn't burn from the trees. It burns from the embers. A green tree is full of water and it doesn't catch easily. A house is full of dry wood and curtains and couches and paper and plastic, and all it needs is one ember in one attic vent. So yes, you'll find a house burned to its foundations next to a green tree. I've seen it a hundred times. It's not a laser. It's a house.

He said the cars had melted in a strange way, with puddles of shining metal under them. That's aluminium. It melts at a much lower temperature than steel. Engine blocks, wheels. Any fire hot enough to burn a house is hot enough to melt the aluminium wheels off a car parked next to it.

He said the blue things had survived. I actually looked into that one, because a guy at the station asked. Some blue things survived. Some blue things didn't. Nobody posts a video of the blue house that burned.

It's easy to laugh at those people. The young guys at the station laughed at them. I didn't, much, because I understood them. A man loses his house to something enormous and stupid and nobody's fault, and his mind can't hold it, so it builds something it can hold: a villain with a machine. A villain is a comfort. A villain means somebody could be stopped.

The trouble was, there were other things too. Quieter things. Things I couldn't laugh at, because I'd been there.

I knew about the hoses on the ridge.

I knew there'd been no extra engines sent to the Palisades on the night of the wind, when in other years there had been.

I knew the shift had gone home.

I knew about the engines in the yard with their wheels off, because I'd stood there in December and been offered one for Christmas.

I knew, now, like everybody, that the reservoir had been empty.

And I was starting to hear, in the way you hear things in the department, that people were already writing the report. There's always a report after a big fire. It's called an after-action report, and it's supposed to be the department looking at itself in the mirror and writing down honestly what went right and what went wrong, so it can do better next time. The man writing it was a good man, a battalion chief, one rank above a captain like me, whom I'd known for years, careful and honest, and I heard he was writing it straight. And then I heard that other people were reading his drafts. And then I heard that some of the sentences were coming out. The

sentence about the engines. The sentence about the shift. The sentence about the ridge.

I heard it the way you hear about a rock slide on a road you haven't driven yet.

Somewhere in there, in the weeks after, the Mayor fired the chief of the whole department. Not my chief — the big one, at the top. There was a press conference. The reason given was the thing about the shift, about not holding over the men and not sending the engines. Some people said it was right. Some people said the chief was being thrown off the sled so the wolves would slow down. The chief said that the budget had been cut and there hadn't been enough of anything. The Mayor said the budget hadn't been cut that much. They both had numbers. Everybody always has numbers.

I sat in my apartment and watched it and thought about my own chief, on the ridge, in the clean jacket, saying the same sentence twice. Nobody fired him. Nobody even knew his name. And I thought about me, rolling the hose, and nobody knew my name either.

That's the thing about a disaster made of a thousand small decisions. You can fire one person at the top of it, and everybody feels better, and the other nine hundred and ninety-nine go back to work.

The probationer came by one evening with a six-pack. We sat on my little balcony overlooking the parking lot and drank it and didn't say much. After a while he said, "Cap, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"If we'd stayed. On the ridge. If we'd kept digging. Would it have mattered?"

I thought about lying to him. It would have been kind. He was going to be a firefighter for thirty years, and he was going to carry that question up and down a lot of hills, and I could have taken it off him with one word.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe not. Maybe there were ten more of them under that hill and we'd have found one. Maybe the wind

would have found another. Maybe it would have come from somewhere else."

He nodded.

"But it would have been the right thing to do," I said. "That part I do know. It would have been the thing the job is for. And we didn't do it. I didn't. I was the captain and I said it was a bad idea and then I did it anyway, because a man in a clean jacket said it twice."

He was quiet for a long time.

"You said it, though," he said. "You said it was a bad idea. I heard you."

"Yeah," I said. "Put that on my headstone. *He said it was a bad idea.*"

He laughed. I laughed. It was a terrible joke. We drank the rest of the beer.

20. The Chimney

Omid

They let us back in at the end of the month, with an escort, for a few hours, in white suits.

That's the first thing nobody tells you. You don't just drive home. The ash is poison. Everything that burned — the paint, the plastic, the batteries, the car tyres, the pool chemicals, the pesticides under every kitchen sink in the neighbourhood — all of it is now a fine grey powder that gets into your lungs and your skin, and before anyone can so much as pick through the rubble, men from the federal government in white hazardous-material suits have to go through every lot and take away the worst of it. Then the Army Corps of Engineers comes, with trucks, to scrape the lots bare. For the first visit, they gave us white paper suits of our own, and masks, and gloves, and told us not to touch anything we didn't have to, and not to stay long.

We went through a checkpoint at the bottom of Palisades Drive. There were soldiers there, National Guard, young men and women with rifles who looked like they'd rather be anywhere else, checking our driver's licences against a list. One of them, a girl who couldn't

have been much older than Tara, said to my mother, very gently, "I'm so sorry, ma'am." My mother patted her hand.

Then we drove up.

I want to describe it, and I can't. I've been trying for a long time. I make sounds for a living and I have no sound for it. The best I can do is this: it was quiet. That was the thing. The whole way up the canyon, the whole length of Palisades Drive, the whole of the Highlands, there was no sound. No birds. No sprinklers. No leaf blowers. No dogs. No televisions through open windows. No wind, even; the wind had gone back to the desert where it lives. Just the engine of our car and our own breathing inside the masks.

And grey. Everything grey. Street after street of grey, in the shapes of houses. You could see the plan of each house laid out on the ground in ash, like a drawing: here was the kitchen, here was the hall, here was where the bedrooms were. And standing up out of every plan, like a gravestone at the head of a grave, the chimney. The brick chimneys were the only thing that didn't burn. Whole streets of them, in rows, standing alone, black at the top, pointing at the sky.

We parked at the bottom of our driveway. Tara got out first. My wife stayed in the car. My mother and I walked up together, holding hands like children, in our white paper suits.

My father's house was a frame.

The steel had held. I want to say that for him. The glass was gone and the floors were gone and the roof was gone and everything inside was gone, but the steel frame was still standing on the hill, twisted in places, sagging in one corner where the heat had been worst, but standing, like the skeleton of some enormous animal that had died on its feet. You could look straight through it to the ocean. The column by the stairs, the one he knocked on twice every morning, was still there.

The pool was full, and perfectly blue, and the only thing on the whole hill with a colour.

And at the back, where the living room had been, where the glass wall had sagged and broken while I watched it on a hotel bed, there

was a strange shape lying in the ash. It was big and dark and curved, and at first I didn't know what it was. It looked like a harp. Like a great iron harp lying on its side, the strings gone, just the frame.

My mother knew. She walked straight to it.

"The piano," she said.

It's made of iron, the inside of a grand piano. I didn't know that. The wood burns — the case, the keys, the lid, the legs — and the strings snap and melt, but inside every grand piano there is a heavy iron plate, shaped like a harp, which holds all the tension of all the strings, and it doesn't burn. It just lies there when everything else is gone, like a bone.

My mother knelt down beside it in her white paper suit. She put her gloved hand on the iron, very gently, the way she used to put her hand on a child's shoulder when they were rushing.

She didn't cry. I've never seen my mother cry. She stayed there a long time, kneeling, with her hand on it. Then she stood up and brushed the ash off her knees, and looked around at the whole grey hill, and said something to herself in Persian, too quiet for me to hear.

Tara was up at the back of the lot, near where the pine trees had been, where the slope started going up toward the ridge. She called me.

"Dad. Look."

At the edge of the lot, in the grey ash, among the black stumps of my father's pines, something was growing. A few big soft leaves, grey-green, pushing up out of the ash from an old root that had survived underground. Just leaves. No flower yet.

My mother came and stood beside us and looked at it for a long time.

"Tātureh," she said.

"It's already growing back," Tara said. "How is anything growing back?"

"It likes it," my mother said. "It likes the ash. It likes it when everything else is gone." She looked up the hill, at the black ridge. "It'll flower in the summer. The way it's supposed to."

I didn't say anything. I was looking up at the ridge too, at the place near the top of the trail where the New Year's fire had been. There were little coloured flags stuck in the ground up there. Dozens of them, orange and blue and yellow, in a pattern. I asked one of the escorts what they were. He said the investigators had put them there. The federal ones. They were marking where the fire had started.

He pointed. It was the same spot. Exactly the same spot. The place where the black patch had been. The place where Tara and I had stood on the fourth of January and watched a thread of grey smoke come up out of the ground and decided it was steam.

On the way back down the driveway, my mother stopped by the steel column at the bottom of the stairs, the one that was still standing. She reached out and knocked on it. Twice.

"A hundred years," she said. "He said a hundred years." She looked at me. "It stood forty-five. That's a good house, Omid-jān [oh-MEED-jaan]. That's a very good house."

It was the first time since I was a small boy that she'd called me that.

21. Declared Out

Ray

A week after they called it contained, I drove up to the ridge on my day off and walked up the trail alone.

I don't entirely know why. I told myself I wanted to see the flags. The investigators had been up there for weeks, the federal ones, with their cameras and their little coloured markers and their notebooks, working out where it had started. Everybody at the station knew what they'd found. It was going to be in the newspapers soon. A holdover, they were going to call it. A fire that had held over from the one before — that had lain in the ground for six days and come back. That's the official word. *Holdover*. It's the

same word we use for keeping a shift on duty after it's supposed to go home.

I thought about that on the way up. We didn't hold the shift over. The fire did.

The hill was black. All of it, from the top of the trail to the bottom of the canyon and beyond, as far as you could see in every direction, black and grey and silent. The stumps of the old brush stuck up out of the ash like the bristles of a burned broom, just the way they had on the second of January, only now it was everything, the whole mountain, not eight acres. It was very quiet. My boots made a soft crunching sound in the ash, and that was the only sound there was.

The flags were where I knew they'd be.

I stood in the middle of them. The patch of stumps near the top. The old chaparral with the thick woody bases, fifty years old or more. I found the rock. I swear to you I found the same rock, the size of a loaf of bread, grey, sitting just where it had sat. I took my glove off and put my bare hand flat on it.

Cold. Stone cold.

That's what it feels like, when a fire's really out. You'd think it would be a relief.

I stood there a long time with my hand on the rock. I thought about a lot of things. I thought about my father's hands shaking when he held a cup, and the one time he told me about 1961, sitting on the porch of our house in the Valley when I was about fifteen and had just said I wanted to join the department. He'd told me about the wooden roofs catching from the top down, and the embers riding ahead, and standing in a street in Bel Air with a hose and watching houses catch that he hadn't reached yet. And then he'd said something I'd forgotten until that morning on the ridge.

He'd said, *The fire always tells you where it's going. Nobody ever wants to hear it.*

Near the rock, in the ash, something was coming up out of the ground. A few big grey-green leaves. I knew what it was. Every firefighter in those hills knows what it is. It comes up after fire. It likes the ash.

I crouched down and looked at it.

"You were watching," I said to it. Out loud. On a mountain. To a weed. "The whole time."

It didn't say anything. It's a plant.

I stood up and put my glove back on. I looked down the canyon toward the Highlands, toward the grey streets with the chimneys standing in rows, and I found the one I was looking for without really trying. You could see it from up there. A steel frame on a steep lot, a skeleton on a hill with the ocean showing through its ribs, and next to it a swimming pool, perfectly blue, like somebody had left a piece of the sky lying on the ground.

The house with the cameras. The one where I'd looked up.

I don't know who lived there. I never found out. I'd thought about it, in the weeks since. I'd thought about finding out, driving up there, knocking on the door of whatever apartment they were in now, and saying — what? *I'm the one who stood in your driveway. I'm the one whose hose went soft. I'm the one who rolled the hose on the ridge. I said it was a bad idea.*

Put that on my headstone.

I walked back down the trail. At the bottom, at the truck, I looked back up at the ridge once more, the way you look back at a house when you leave it.

On the radio, on the way home, a woman read the news. She said the Palisades fire had been declared contained. She said the investigation into its cause was ongoing. She said the department had said that any fire remaining underground after the New Year's blaze would have been undetectable.

I turned the radio off.

The clock on the dashboard said 12:12.

Heard in the Ash

Six years before this, in the autumn of 2018, I was in two places on the same day.

In the north, in a town in the pines called Paradise, I took almost everything. Eighty-five people. Nearly fourteen thousand homes. I came through that town so fast that people died in their cars on the one road out, which I want you to remember, because you have a great many towns with one road out. The same morning, down here, I came over the hills at Woolsey, near the valley, and walked all the way to the ocean at Malibu again, the way I had in 1993, and took more than sixteen hundred buildings on the way.

That was the year the insurers did their arithmetic.

I will explain it plainly, because it is not complicated, only dull, and the dull things are the ones that ruin you. An insurance company is a bet. You pay it a little every year, and it bets that your house will not burn. It makes that bet with ten thousand families, and most of the houses do not burn, and the little payments from all of them add up to more than the few houses it has to rebuild, and the difference is its living. It works beautifully, as long as the houses keep mostly not burning.

In 2017 and 2018 the houses burned. More of them than the bet allowed for. The insurers paid out, by their own accounts, more in two years than they had taken in for many years before. And they looked at their tables, and they looked at the hills, and they looked at me, and they concluded that I was going to keep coming. They were right. I will give them that. They understood me better than your cities did.

So they wanted to charge more. And your state has rules about how much an insurer may charge and how it may decide — old rules, written by voters in another century, to protect people from companies who charged too much. Under those rules, raising the price was slow, and hard, and argued over for years. So the companies did the other thing. They stopped selling. One after another, they stopped writing new policies in the hills. Then they stopped renewing old ones. The letters went out. The families were pushed, one by one, into the lifeboat — the plan of last resort, the one the companies themselves are required to pay into, which charges more for less.

Now. Some families say it was not one after another. Some families say it was all at once, together, by arrangement, and they have gone to court to say so, and a judge has said they may make their case. I do not know if they are right. I was not in the room. I only noticed that the letters arrived in the high neighbourhood in the same season, in the same envelopes, like birds leaving a tree all at once — and that birds leaving a tree all at once can mean a hawk is coming, or can mean that one bird moved and the others followed. You cannot tell from the ground.

I noticed also that when I had finished, and the ash was still warm, men came to buy the land.

Not all at once. Quietly. Some of them were families who had lost their own house and wanted to stay near their neighbours. Some of them were builders, who have always bought burned land, and always will. And some of them were people with a great deal of money and no faces, who sent texts in the night and offers by telephone, cash, as is, quick close, to people who were sitting in hotel rooms counting the difference between what they had and what they had lost. By the end of that year, of the burned lots that sold in the high neighbourhood, roughly two in every five went to people who buy land to sell again. The Governor made a rule for a while that nobody could offer less than the land was worth. For a while.

I want to be very careful, because I have promised to be. I am not telling you that anyone called me. I cannot see into a boardroom. I am telling you that a great many people, in a great many rooms, each made a sensible small decision, and each decision left a door open for me, and when I came through the door there were other people standing on the far side of it, already holding a pen.

Some of you think that is a conspiracy. Some of you think it is just a market.

I have been burning longer than either word has existed. From where I stand, I cannot see the difference. I am not sure there is one.

Heard at the Edge

I am going to tell you something now that I have not told anyone.

I have been here before.

Not in 1961. Not in 1993. Not in any of the years I have already told you about. I mean here. This ridge. This night. These white flowers, open when they should be closed. This small bright mark on the hill, just after midnight, while the fireworks are still going up over the city.

I remember it the way you remember a room you have stood in once: every detail sharp, and none of it quite in the right order. I remember the wind that is coming. I remember the soft hoses and the black skin in the empty bowl and the iron harp lying in the ash. I remember a man with his hand on a cold rock. I remember a girl in front of a mirror, drawing lines.

Fire has no calendar. I have told you that. I burn in all my years at once. Sometimes I cannot tell whether a night has already happened or has only been waiting.

Listen.

Somewhere below me, in a station at the bottom of the canyon, a man is sitting very still in a chair with a plate on his knees.

Somewhere below me, on a deck behind a glass house, a man is sitting beside his mother under a blanket, with a telephone in his hand.

The white flowers are open. They have been open all night. They are very sweet.

In a moment, a clock is going to say something.

V. CONTAINED, MOSTLY

22. Twelve Twelve

Ray

I was rinsing my plate at the sink when the tones dropped.

No.

That isn't right. I have to tell this part exactly, or none of the rest is worth anything.

I wasn't at the sink. I was in the recliner in the day room, the brown one with the broken footrest that nobody will let us throw away. There was a paper plate on my knee with half a piece of bad cake on it, and the plastic fork had fallen on the floor. On the television, with the sound down, New York was showing the ball drop again, three hours late, for the West Coast, a crowd of people in plastic hats. Two of the guys were asleep on the couch. The probationer was in the kitchen doorway with his jacket half on, looking at me.

And the tones were going. Loud. Real. The sound every firefighter knows in his spine.

Brush fire. Reported by callers. Near the top of the trail above the Highlands.

I didn't move. That's the first thing I remember. For maybe two seconds, which is a very long time when the tones have dropped, I sat in that chair with the plate on my knee and did not move at all, because I did not know what year it was.

I knew it was the first of January. I knew that the way you know your own name. But I also knew — I knew it with my whole body, the way you know a bone is broken — that it was February, and that I had just come down off a black mountain with my hand cold from a rock, and that a steel house was standing like a skeleton on a hill with a blue pool beside it, and that the whole of the Palisades was ash, and twelve people were dead, and the chief of the department had been fired, and a report was being written with the true sentences taken out of it. I had lived all of that. I had lived it for weeks. I could feel the weeks in my legs.

The microwave in the kitchen said 12:12.

"Cap?" the probationer said. "Cap, you coming?"

I got up. The plate fell off my knee. I went to the engine. My body did it without me, the way it's done it for twenty-seven years. On the way, through the open bay door, I looked up at the ridge.

There it was. A little orange glow, high up, near the top of the trail. Small. Pretty, almost. Like a campfire somebody had left. All around it, on the dark slope, dozens of small pale shapes that I knew were flowers, white, open, turned toward us.

I stopped in the middle of the bay floor and the probationer walked into my back.

"Sorry, Cap."

"What day is it?" I said.

He looked at me strangely. "New Year's," he said. "It's New Year's. It's, like, twelve minutes into New Year's."

I want to tell you what I felt, and I can't do it in a straight line, so I'm going to do it the way it came.

I felt sick. Actually sick, a hot wave up from my stomach into my throat.

I felt relief so large I almost sat down on the concrete. Nothing had happened yet. Nobody was dead. The houses were there, all of them, lit up for the holidays down the canyon, every window, every Christmas light. The steel house was there. I didn't know where it was, exactly, but I knew it was there, somewhere in those lights, with its glass wall and its cameras and a piano in the living room I'd never seen.

I felt like a man who has been let out of prison and told that he hasn't been sentenced yet.

And then I felt the worst thing, which was that I knew what the next two hours would look like, and the next six days, and I was right.

We went up the trail road in the dark, with the engine grinding in low gear, and the fire sat on the crest like a necklace somebody had dropped. It was eight acres. I knew it would be. There was no wind. I knew there wouldn't be. We ran the hose up the trail, and the helicopter came in low with its big light on, like a lighthouse that had decided to go for a walk, and dropped its water, and the water

came down silver through the searchlight and hissed where it landed.

The probationer said *holy shit*, softly, reverently, like he was in church.

I said it with him. The same two words, at the same time. He turned and looked at me with his mouth open. I didn't explain. What would I have said?

By four in the morning we had a line around it. By sunrise it was contained. The incident commander got on the radio and said so, in the exact words I had heard him use, in the exact tone, and every man on that hill breathed out at once, except me.

I stood on the ridge with the sun coming up over the city and the ocean going from black to grey to silver, and the smoke from the little burned patch lying down flat and drifting away east, and I said to myself, very quietly, the only word I had for it.

Dream.

It was a dream. That's what it had to be. I had fallen asleep in a recliner with a plate of cake on my knee at twenty to twelve on New Year's Eve, after standing out behind the station smelling something sweet coming down off the hill, and I had dreamed for half an hour, and in that half hour I had lived five weeks.

I had never in my life had a dream like it. I don't have dreams, much. I'm a firefighter; I sleep like a dropped sandbag. When I do dream, it's the ordinary kind, the kind where you're late for something and your teeth fall out. It isn't the kind with weather in it. It isn't the kind where you can smell the ash on your own gloves, and read the numbers on the clock, and feel the particular weight of a hose that has gone soft.

I didn't tell anyone. Not that morning. Who do you tell? *Chief, I had a dream.* I could hear how that would sound. I could hear exactly how that would sound, because I've been in this job long enough to have laughed at men who said less.

So I did what firefighters do with things they can't say. I went back to the station and ate eggs and didn't say it.

But I'll tell you what I did before I left the ridge. I walked over to the patch of stumps near the top. The old chaparral with the thick woody bases, fifty years old. I found the rock, grey, the size of a loaf of bread, right where it was going to be.

I took off my glove and put my bare hand on it.

It was warm.

23. Sâl-e No

Omid

I woke up because my phone was buzzing in my hand.

That's all. That's the whole of it. I was sitting in a deck chair on the back deck of my father's house with a blanket over my knees and an empty wine glass on the boards beside me, and my phone was buzzing in my hand, and I opened my eyes.

The screen showed a photograph. Tara, in a paper crown, pulling a face, at my wife's family's party with the coat check. The message under it said *happy new year from the fancy people xx*. It had been sent at 12:01.

The time on the screen said 12:12.

I don't know how long I sat there. I remember the sounds first, because sounds are my job. The fireworks. Pop-pop-pop, thinning out now, over the village, over the flats of Santa Monica, over the Valley behind the hills. A dog barking somewhere down the canyon. The small tick of the house settling behind me in the cold, the steel frame contracting a little the way it always does at night. My mother breathing, beside me, in the other deck chair. She was asleep under her blanket, in her good coat, with her chin on her chest, snoring very gently, the way she has snored my whole life and denied it my whole life.

Then I looked up at the ridge, and it was on fire.

Not much. A small bright orange mark, high up, near the top of the trail, right in the middle of the white flowers. Like somebody had struck a match in the back row of a theatre.

I made a sound. I don't know what sound. My mother woke up.

She didn't say anything at first. She lifted her head the way deer lift their heads, and she looked at me, and then she followed my eyes up the hill to the little orange mark, and she looked at that for a long time. Then she looked back at me.

I have spent my whole life reading my mother's face, and it has always been like reading a letter in a language I only half speak. That night I read it all the way to the bottom. There was no surprise in it. There was something like pity, and something like tiredness, and something else I didn't have a name for until much later, which was recognition. The recognition of one person who has come back from somewhere, seeing that another person has come back from the same place.

"We've done this before," she said.

"Maman," I said. "Maman, the house—"

"I know," she said. "It's here. Go and look."

I went and looked.

I got up out of the deck chair with the blanket falling off me and went through the sliding door into the house, and it was all there. All of it. The glass wall, whole, black, reflecting the room and me in it with my mouth open. The living room. The rug. The big grey sofa. The Steinway, with its lid down, and my mother's reading glasses on top of the lid where she always leaves them. The kitchen. The clocks on the oven and the microwave and the coffee machine, all saying the right time, not blinking, just quietly telling the truth.

I put my hands flat on the glass wall. It was cold. It was solid. It didn't bend.

I went to the column at the bottom of the stairs, the steel one, and I knocked on it twice.

Then I went to the kitchen drawer, the one with the takeout menus and the dead batteries, and opened it, and there was the card. A name. A phone number. No company. A line of small grey print underneath.

I read the grey print. For the first time. Under a kitchen light at a quarter past twelve on New Year's night, in my socks, with my heart going like a trapped bird.

It was the name of a company. Just a name. Something bland, with *Holdings* at the end of it, and an address in an office building downtown.

It wasn't proof of anything. It was a business card. I put it back in the drawer. I closed the drawer.

Then I went back into the living room and sat down at my mother's piano, which I have not played seriously since I was twelve years old, and I lifted the lid, and I pressed one key. A low one. I held it down and let it ring.

It rang for a long time in the dark house. I sat and listened to it until there was nothing left of it at all.

When I went back out onto the deck, my mother was standing at the railing with the blanket around her shoulders, watching the ridge. The fire engines were up there now. You could see their lights moving along the trail, red and white, very small, and the long beam of a helicopter searchlight coming in low over the crest, and under it, falling, a curtain of water, silver in the light.

"They'll put it out," I said. "Tonight. It'll be out by morning."

"Yes," she said.

"And then it'll come back."

She didn't answer that. She didn't have to.

We stood there together until the sky started to go grey over the city. I didn't say anything else and neither did she. At about six, when the helicopter had gone and the lights on the ridge had thinned out to one or two, she turned to go inside, and she stopped at the door, and put her hand on my arm.

"When you're ready," she said, "I want to show you something. Of your father's. No." She corrected herself. "Of mine."

24. Two Hours and One Hose

Ray

On the morning of January second we walked the black.

It was all the same. That's what I want you to understand. The cold. The grey powder. The stumps sticking up like the bristles of a burnt

broom. The ground warm like a bed somebody had just got out of. The probationer working his patch near the top with his glove off, and looking up at me with that strange expression, and saying, "Cap. It's hot."

I was already beside him. I'd walked to that patch first thing, without meaning to.

We started digging. And about twenty minutes later, the chief came up the trail in his clean jacket, with his radio on his hip, and the look on his face of a man who had been on the phone since six o'clock with people who do not walk hillsides.

I have thought about what I did next more than I have thought about anything in my life, including my marriage. I want to tell it plainly and not make it bigger than it was, because it wasn't big. It was the size of a conversation on a hill.

He told us to pack it up. Roll the hose. We were done here.

I told him about the hot ground. I told him about the rock.

He told me about the protected plants. The parkland. The people who look after the park not wanting us tearing up the hill. The fire was out. Crews had been over it all night.

And I said the five words. "Chief, this is a bad idea."

I watched his mouth. I knew what he was going to say. He was going to say it again, in the same tone, the way orders get said the second time. And I knew that when he'd said it twice, twenty-seven years of this job were going to bend my back down and pick up that hose for me.

So I didn't wait for the second time. I kept talking. I'd had a whole month to work out what I'd say, and I said it.

I said, "Chief, give me two hours and one hose. That's all. We'll stay off the plants. We'll dig the stumps that are hot and nothing else. Two hours."

He started to say something. I kept going.

I said, "And I want a drone up here. One of ours, with a thermal camera. I want to fly the whole burn and see what's hot. Then if it's clean, we leave, and I'll roll the hose myself."

The department has drones, you see. It had them the whole time. Small ones, with cameras that see heat instead of light, so a patch of ground that's hotter than it should be shows up on the screen glowing white. They're used for exactly this. They're just not always used, because somebody has to ask for one, and asking for one means saying out loud that you think the fire might not be out, and nobody likes to be the man who says that at the end of a long night when everybody wants to go home.

I said it. On the radio, too, not just to his face. I got on the radio and asked for the drone, which meant it was said in a place where it would be written down.

He looked at me for a long time. I'd known him fifteen years. He's not a bad man. I want to keep saying that, because it matters. He wasn't a villain. He was a tired man in a clean jacket in the middle of a system that rewards the fire being out and punishes the fire not being out, and he'd been told that morning, by somebody above him, that the fire was out, and I was making him say it wasn't.

"Two hours," he said finally. "And stay off the plants."

The drone came up a little before noon. A young technician drove it up the trail road in a pickup and flew it off the tailgate, a little buzzing thing no bigger than a dinner plate, and we all crowded round the screen on his lap to watch.

On the screen, the burn scar was a grey ghost of the hillside, all in shades of grey, cold ground dark and warmer ground lighter. And scattered across it, in the patch of old stumps near the top, and in a few other places further along, were small white spots. Glowing. Like stars on a cloudy night.

The technician counted them. He got to eleven and stopped counting out loud.

Nobody said anything. The chief was standing behind me, looking over my shoulder at the screen. I felt him go still.

After a while he said, quietly, "Keep the line on it."

That's all. *Keep the line on it.* He turned around and walked back down the trail, and got on his phone, and I don't know who he called or what he told them. He didn't say anything else to me that

day. He didn't say anything else to me for a week. And that fire was not declared out on January second.

We dug for two days. We dug up the stumps, one by one, the old woody ones that had been growing on that ridge since before the probationer's parents were born, and we opened them up, and inside some of them — not all of them, some of them — we found it. The thing I'd told the probationer about in the first year. A coal the size of your thumb, lying in a tunnel the width of a pencil, down in the root, glowing orange, patient, eating very slowly. We found five of them. Five. We spread them out and drowned them and turned the dirt over and drowned it again.

On the evening of the third, the drone flew again, and the screen was grey all over, with no white spots anywhere.

The fire was declared out.

Declared out. The two most expensive words in the job.

I didn't believe them. I want to be honest. I'd found five. The drone said there were none left. And I'd learned that month — that month which hadn't happened, which I had lived anyway — that a thing can be undetectable and still be there. There might have been a sixth. There might have been one the camera couldn't see, too deep, under a rock. The ridge is big, and the roots go down a long way, and I was one man with a shovel and a dream.

So I did the only thing left. I went back.

On the evening of the fourth, and again on the fifth, on my own time, I drove up the trail road after dark and walked the burn alone with a flashlight and my bare hand. I didn't find anything. The ground was cold. The rock was cold.

The white flowers were still open, all the way up the slope, all around me, very sweet, turned toward me in the dark. I stood among them with my flashlight and didn't look at them too long.

25. The Notebook

Omid

My mother showed me the notebook on the afternoon of New Year's Day, at the kitchen table, while my wife and Tara slept off the party upstairs.

I had told her everything by then. It took most of the morning. I told her about the smoke and the soft hydrants and the six cameras going dark, about the hotel and the lobby and the man with the Oscar in a grocery bag, about the white suits and the grey streets and the iron harp in the ash. She listened without interrupting, which she has never done in my life. When I got to the piano she closed her eyes. When I got to the part where she knelt beside it and put her hand on the iron, she opened them again, and nodded, very slightly, as if I had confirmed a date.

Then she went to my father's study and came back with a small notebook. Old, brown leather, the corners worn round. I'd never seen it before. She put it on the table between us.

"Nineteen eighty," she said. "The first night in this house."

She opened it. The pages were covered in her handwriting, in Persian, small and neat, the ink gone brown with age. I can speak Persian, badly. I can't read it well. She read it to me, translating as she went, running her finger along the lines from right to left.

It was a dream. She had written it down in the morning, the first morning they woke up in the new house, when the paint was still wet and there were no curtains and the whole canyon was full of sunlight. She'd dreamed that night, she wrote, of white flowers on the hill above the house, open in the winter when they should have been closed. Of a wind so dry it made her hands crack. Of the glass wall, my father's glass wall, bending inward in the middle like a sheet of plastic in an oven. Of her piano, lying in grey ash, nothing left of it but its iron heart, like a harp on its side. And of a boy.

"A boy," she read, "grown, with a face like his father's, sitting in a small room far away, watching our house burn through a little window in his hand."

She stopped reading. She put her finger on the line and kept it there.

"I didn't have a little window in my hand in 1980," she said. "Nobody did. I didn't know what it meant. I thought it was a television. I thought it meant a son who would watch television too much." She almost smiled. "That part came true too."

I couldn't speak.

"I told your father," she said. "At breakfast. The first morning. I told him the whole thing." She shrugged, the Persian shrug, with the whole face. "He laughed. He said, *Āzar, you're afraid of a little fire, like the American*. The man who sold us the lot. He was very proud of that joke. He told it for forty years."

"You stayed," I said.

"We stayed." She closed the notebook and laid her hand flat on the cover. "What were we going to do? We'd left one country already. We had nothing to go back to. We had this house and his job and you, two years old, asleep upstairs. And I thought: it's a dream. My grandmother's flowers. It means nothing." She looked up the hill through the glass, at the ridge, at the black patch and the white flowers and a single fire engine still parked at the end of the trail road, small in the afternoon light. "And every year, after that, I watched the flowers. Every summer they opened, the way they're supposed to, and every winter they closed, and I thought, *good*. Forty-four years. Every winter, closed." She was quiet for a moment. "Until this one."

"Maman. When did they open? This year?"

"Christmas," she said. "I noticed at Christmas. I've been standing at that window for a week."

The tidying. The albums stacked on the desk beside the empty bag. The back doors she'd stopped opening. *It smells like August*.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said.

She looked at me with something very tired and very kind.

"Would you have listened?" she said. "Your father didn't. And you are more his son than mine." She put her hand on mine. "Now

you've seen it yourself. That's different. Nobody listens to someone else's dream. You have to have your own."

There was one more thing, and she told it to me before the others came down. She told it quickly, looking at the notebook and not at me, the way you tell something you've kept too long.

"The man with the watch," she said. "The one who came in the summer. You put his card in the drawer."

"Yes."

"A man came before. In 2018. After the big fire in Malibu, the one on the television. A different man, same kind of card. Same kind of watch. He said he represented buyers. He said things change up here." She shrugged. "Your father told him no. He said the house would stand a hundred years. The man said, *Of course, of course*, and smiled, and left the card, and your father threw it away." She looked up at me. "I didn't. I kept it. It's in the back of this book."

She opened the notebook at the back cover and there it was, tucked into a pocket in the leather. A business card. A different name. The same bland kind of company, with *Holdings* at the end of it, and the same office building downtown.

"It doesn't mean anything," my mother said. "I know. People buy land. People have always bought land. Your father bought this land from a frightened man." She slid the card back into the pocket. "But they've been coming up the hill for a long time, Omid-jān. Waiting. Like the flowers."

26. The Driveway

Omid

On the afternoon of January second, I went up the trail to find him.

I didn't know his name. I didn't know which station he was at. I only knew his face, from a small square on a small screen, black with soot, squinting up into a camera for three seconds. And I knew that the fire crews would be up on the ridge that day, walking the black, because in the dream they had been, and the dream had been right about everything.

Tara came with me. I hadn't told her anything. I'd said I wanted to see what a fire left behind, and she'd looked at me the way my mother looks at me and said, "That's usually my line," and put on her good shoes.

They were there. A crew of five, near the top, in the patch of old stumps, digging. A fire engine at the end of the trail road with its hoses run up the hill. A young man sitting on the tailgate of a pickup with a little drone on his knees. And in the middle of it, leaning on a shovel, taking a break, with his helmet off and his grey hair plastered flat with sweat, a man in his fifties with a face I'd have known anywhere.

I walked up to him. He watched me come. He had the look firefighters get when civilians walk into their work, polite and wary. Tara stayed a few steps behind me.

I didn't know how to start. I'd been rehearsing it all the way up the trail and none of it was any good. So I just said it.

"You stood in my driveway."

He looked at me. He didn't say anything.

"On the seventh," I said. "In the afternoon. Around three. A steel house with a glass wall, at the top of the Highlands. There was a hydrant at the curb and it went soft on you, and you walked back to check it, and you looked up. At the camera over the garage. You looked straight up into it."

His face didn't change at all. That was what told me. A man who doesn't know what you're talking about frowns, or smiles, or asks. His face just stopped, like a clock.

"You said something," I said. "I couldn't hear it. There was too much noise. But your lips moved. You were looking right at me and your lips moved."

The probationer, the young one, had stopped digging and was staring at us. Tara had come up beside me.

The firefighter set his shovel down against a stump, very carefully, as if it were made of glass.

"I said *I'm sorry*," he said.

His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat.

"I didn't say it out loud," he said. "I thought it. I thought it at the camera. *Somebody's going to see this. I'm sorry.*"

"Yes," I said.

We stood there on the burned ridge looking at each other for a long time. The wind was very light. It was cold. Below us, down the canyon, my father's house stood on its hill with its glass wall catching the afternoon sun, whole.

"Your pine trees," he said at last. "On the side of the house. They went up like torches."

"My father planted them," I said. "When I was a baby."

"You said there was a piano," he said. "I never saw it. I saw the frame. After. From up here. A steel frame on a steep lot, and a blue pool. I stood up here in February with my hand on a rock and I looked down at your house." He stopped. "I thought about finding you. I didn't know who you were."

"My mother says it stood forty-five years," I said. "She says that's a good house."

He almost laughed. It came out of him like a cough.

Tara was looking from one of us to the other. "What," she said, very slowly, "is going on."

So we told her. We sat on two burned stumps on the ridge, the firefighter and me, with the crew digging around us and the probationer pretending not to listen and the young man with the drone definitely listening, and we told her, in pieces, interrupting each other, finishing each other's sentences. The clocks at 12:12. The white flowers. The hoses rolled on the second of January. The soft hydrants. The hotel. The report with the sentences taken out. We compared it like two men comparing directions they'd been given to the same house: *did you go left at the church? Yes. And then the gas station? Yes, the one with the broken sign.* It matched. Everything he'd seen, I'd heard about. Everything I'd seen, he'd been somewhere near. Some of it neither of us had seen, only known, the way you know things in dreams.

Tara listened to the whole thing with her clinical face. The biologist watching a new kind of insect. When we got to the hotel room and the mirror, she went quiet.

"The mirror," she said.

"You covered it in sticky notes," I said. "With lines drawn between them in hotel pen. You had a separate corner for the nonsense. You called a man at breakfast *the egg man*."

She looked at me for a long moment.

"That sounds like me," she said, in a small voice. "That's the scariest thing you've said."

Then she said, because she's her grandmother's granddaughter: "Okay. So how?"

The firefighter looked up the slope at the white flowers. We all did. They were open in the afternoon, which they shouldn't have been either — they close in the day — all the way up the trail, dozens of them, pale and still.

"Momoy [MO-moy]," he said.

"What?"

"That's what the Chumash called it. The people who lived here before. A park ranger told me years ago. They used it — the old ones, the ones who knew how — to see things. Things that were far away. Things that were coming. It's dangerous. It'll kill you, if you don't know what you're doing. It's full of things that'll make you see what isn't there." He shook his head. "But you'd have to eat it. Drink it. Not smell it from a deck."

"We smelled it," I said. "Both of us. New Year's Eve. Before midnight. It came down off the ridge."

"I know," he said. "I smelled it too. I stood out behind the station trying to place it." He was quiet. "The smell shouldn't do anything. I'm telling you that honestly. I've read the reports. I've taken people to the emergency room who ate the seeds. You don't get anything off the smell but a headache."

"And yet," Tara said.

"And yet," he agreed.

My mother's grandmother's word, in Kashan. The thieves used it to take your rug. The saints used it to see.

We sat with that for a while. Then the firefighter said the thing that I've come to think is the truest thing either of us said that day, and maybe the truest thing in this whole account.

"Here's what gets me," he said. "It doesn't matter how we saw it. Not really. Because there wasn't anything in it that was a secret."

I looked at him.

"Think about it," he said. "Every piece of it was lying around in plain sight. The brush that hadn't burned in fifty years — you could see it from the road. The wind — the weather service said it was coming, in words they almost never use. The engines in the yard — I stood there and looked at them before Christmas. The reservoir — it was empty for a year, it was on a city website somewhere. Your insurance leaving — you had a letter. The man with the watch — he gave you his card. And the fire on this hill, under these stumps —" He knocked the side of his boot against the one he was sitting on. "I put my hand on it. I *felt* it."

He looked out over the canyon at the houses.

"Nobody needed a magic flower to see this coming," he said. "We needed somebody to put all the pieces in one room at the same time. That's all the dream did. It put them in the same room." He shrugged. "And then made us live in it for a month so we'd believe it."

Tara said, very quietly, "That's what the mirror was."

27. Six Days

Ray

Here is what a fire captain can do in six days, and what he can't. I'm going to put it down plainly, because I promised myself on that ridge that if I ever got the chance to write it down I wouldn't make it sound cleverer than it was.

What I did on the ridge. You know that part. Two hours and one hose. The drone with the heat camera. Five coals the size of a thumb, dug out and drowned. Then two more nights on my own with a flashlight and my bare hand. That's the first lesson and it's the simplest one: *walk the black until it's cold, then walk it again, and when you have a camera that can see heat, use it every time, not just when somebody's brave enough to ask.* A fire that is "declared out" is a guess with a uniform on. Make the guess with the best tools you've got.

What I did with the forecast. On the third, when the weather service first started hinting at the wind, I wrote a memo. Me. A captain. I'd never written a memo in my life that wasn't about a broken toilet. I wrote it the plain way, one page. I said: a big Santa Ana is forecast for the sixth and seventh. The Palisades has old dry brush, one road out, and a hillside that just burned and may not be cold. In 2011, in a wind like this one, we pre-deployed forty extra engines to the high-risk areas, including this one. I am asking that we do it again. I am asking that the outgoing shift be held over on the sixth. I am asking for water tenders — those are trucks that carry their own water, big tanks on wheels — to be parked and ready in the Highlands before the wind, so that if the hydrants go soft we have something to fight with. I sent it up the chain. Then I sent it sideways, to every captain I knew. Then I called my friend near the top, the one who'd told me *respond*, and read it to him over the phone.

He was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "Ray, what's got into you?"

I said, "I had a bad feeling."

That's true. I just didn't say how long the feeling had lasted.

What came of it. Some. Not all. I want to be honest, because a story where one man's memo saves a city is a lie, and this isn't that story. On the sixth, three extra engines came to the Palisades. Three, where we'd needed ten or twenty or forty. Some of the shift stayed on, the ones who volunteered, because I'd asked them to, and because in a firehouse, when the captain who never asks for anything asks for something, people listen. Two water tenders were

parked at the top of the Highlands, full. It wasn't a plan. It was a patch. But it was something standing where there had been nothing.

What I couldn't do. I couldn't fix the engines in the yard. Nobody can grow mechanics in six days, or conjure the money that should have paid for them over the last five years. Those engines sat there with their wheels off, on the sixth, the same as in the dream.

I couldn't fill the reservoir. I tried. I actually tried, which made me feel like a fool. I called the water department on the fourth and got a very patient woman who explained that the reservoir had been empty since early last year because of the tear in its cover, and that fixing a cover on a reservoir that size requires a contract, and a contract requires bids, and bids take time, and even if the cover were fixed tomorrow, filling a hundred million gallons into a bowl takes weeks, and the water has to be tested to be safe to drink. She was right about every single thing. I thanked her. I hung up. I sat in my truck and said a word I won't write down.

And I couldn't un-grow the brush. That's the big one. That's the one that isn't a six-day problem at all.

What a city could do, if it wanted to. I'm going to put this down too, because a firefighter who's lived through the thing twice ought to be allowed to say it once. None of it is new. Every one of these is in a report somewhere, written by somebody smarter than me, after some fire, and then put on a shelf.

Burn the hills on purpose, in small pieces, in the cool wet months, with crews standing by, the way the people who lived here first did for thousands of years. Not everywhere, and not too often — chaparral burned too often turns into weeds, and weeds are just a faster fuse. But some. The fire is coming to these hills anyway. It's always been coming. The only question is whether it comes in small visits we choose, or in one enormous visit that chooses us.

Cut fuel breaks along the ridges, wide strips where the brush is cleared back to low ground so a fire running along the top has somewhere to slow down, and keep them cut, year after year, not just after the last disaster.

Pay for the mechanics. Pay for the reserve engines. It is the most boring line in any budget and it is the one that decides whether there's a fire engine on your street when you need one.

When the weather service uses the words *particularly dangerous*, pre-deploy. Every time. Hold the shift over. Every time. Stage water. Every time. Most of those times, nothing will happen, and someone will ask what the overtime was for. The answer is: *that's what it's for*.

Build the houses differently. Metal mesh on the vents so the embers can't get in. Roofs that don't catch. Five feet of bare ground around every wall, no mulch, no woodpile, no hedge. No oily trees against the glass. It's all in the building code for new houses now, more or less. The old houses are the problem, and there are a lot of old houses.

Plan the road out before you need it. One road out of a neighbourhood is a trap, and everybody knows which neighbourhoods have one road out. Plan to empty them early, before the fire, not during.

And when the fire's over, write the report straight. Leave the true sentences in. The whole point of looking in a mirror is to see what's actually there.

That's it. That's everything I learned in a month that didn't happen. It fits on a page. It always did.

On the night of the fifth, I went back up to the ridge again. Cold ground. Cold rock. White flowers, open, sweet, turned toward me.

I said to them, out loud, like a fool, "I heard you."

They didn't say anything. They're plants.

28. The Kitchen Table

Omid

On the morning of January third I started doing the things you're supposed to do. I'd known what they were for years. Everybody on the hill knew. There were pamphlets. There were postcards from the fire department in the mailbox every spring. I'd put them in the recycling with the pizza menus.

This is the list. It's not a clever list. That's the point of it.

The first five feet. The fire department calls it *Zone Zero*: the ring of ground right against the walls of the house. Embers land there and find something to burn and then the house catches from the bottom. So you make it bare. It took me till dark. I raked out every inch of the bark mulch my father had spread around the walls because he liked how tidy it looked. I moved the woodpile off the side of the house and down to the bottom of the lot. I pulled out the dry hedge under the kitchen window. I took the cushions off the deck furniture and put them in the garage. I took the doormat in. It sounds like nothing. It took me a whole day, and my back hurt for a week.

The trees. The two pine trees on the side of the house. The ones my father planted when I was a baby. The ones that exploded on CAM 4.

I couldn't cut them down myself. On the afternoon of the third I was standing in the street looking at them, trying to work out who I could call at no notice in a week when every tree person in Los Angeles was on holiday, when a pickup truck went past with rakes and mowers in the back, slowed down, and stopped.

It was him. The young man from Palisades Drive. The one who'd pulled out of a driveway into the burning canyon and said *get in, get in*, and driven us down the wrong side of the road with his hazard lights going.

He didn't know me, of course. He'd never met me. He was just a landscaper doing his rounds, who'd slowed down because he saw a man staring at his own trees the way people do before they call someone.

"You need help with those?" he said.

"Yes," I said. I couldn't say anything else for a moment. "Yes. Please."

He and his cousin took them down the next morning. It took them six hours. When they'd finished I paid him more than he asked, and he tried to give some of it back, and I wouldn't take it. Then I asked him his name. He told me. I wrote it down. I've kept it.

I'm not going to put it here. It's his. But I know it now, and in the other version I never did, and of all the things that changed in those six days, that's one of the ones I'm proudest of, and it's the smallest.

The gutters. Full of pine needles. I got on a ladder and cleaned them out by hand. I found a tennis ball from 1991 up there.

The vents. There are little vents all round the bottom of the roof, so the attic can breathe. Embers get in through them. You can cover them with a very fine metal mesh, so fine a spark can't get through. I bought every roll of it at the hardware store in Santa Monica and spent a day on the ladder with a staple gun. I didn't finish. I did most of them.

The pictures. On the fourth I went through the whole house with my phone and filmed it. Every room. Every drawer. Every shelf. Inside every closet. I talked while I filmed, like a tour guide, saying what everything was and when we'd bought it. The adjuster in the dream had said *people don't photograph their own lives*. I photographed mine. It took three hours and it was one of the strangest afternoons I've ever spent, walking through my own house describing it to a stranger who might never need to see it.

The papers. Passports, birth certificates, the deed, the insurance policies, the hard drives with twenty years of my work on them. My mother's notebook. The photograph albums, forty-five years of them, the ones from Tehran and the ones from here. All of it into two plastic boxes, and the boxes into the back of the car, and the car parked facing down the hill.

The insurance. My wife and I sat at the kitchen table on the fourth and read the FAIR Plan policy, all of it, every page, which I don't think anyone in the history of the world has ever done. We found the ceiling. We found the gaps. We called our agent, at home, on a Saturday, and I think the fact that we'd read the policy frightened him more than anything we said. We raised what we could raise. We added what we could add. It still didn't reach the number on the other side. It got closer.

The road out. On the fifth, I walked down Palisades Drive with Tara. The whole way, from our house to Sunset. It took us well over

an hour on foot. We counted the side streets. We found the two places where a road cuts through to another neighbourhood, which I hadn't known were there after a lifetime of living at the top of that road. We agreed, out loud, standing on the corner of Sunset, that if we ever had to leave, we'd leave early, before anybody told us to, and if the road jammed we'd get out and walk and not wait.

"Dad," Tara said, on the walk back up. "You know we're doing the whole list from the pamphlet."

"I know."

"The pamphlet that comes every year."

"I know."

"Why didn't we just do it before?"

I didn't have an answer that wasn't embarrassing. Because it was a pamphlet. Because the house was steel. Because it hadn't burned in forty-five years. Because I'm a man who makes fake fire sound real for a living and never once thought about the real kind. Because a piece of paper in a mailbox is not the same as watching your mother kneel in the ash.

"Because nobody listens to someone else's dream," I said. "You have to have your own."

She looked at me sideways, the way she does when she's deciding whether I've said something intelligent by accident. Then she let it go.

The neighbours. I told some of them. Not about the dream; about the brush, the wind, the fire on the ridge that might not be out. I told the dentist. I told the family with the two little boys. I told the film producer at the top of the road, who listened to me politely, holding a cup of coffee, and then told me that he had lived in these hills for thirty-one years and had seen a great many wind events and that the fire department was very good, and did I know that he had once won an Academy Award, and I said yes, I knew, my father had held it.

The family with the two little boys cleared their gutters. The dentist moved his woodpile. The producer did nothing. I think about that. You can't make someone else have your dream.

The man with the watch. On the evening of the fifth, I took his card out of the kitchen drawer and called the number.

He answered on the second ring. Warm voice. He remembered me. Of course he did. He said how nice it was to hear from me, and how sorry he'd been about my father, and was I thinking about the conversation we'd had in the summer?

"I wanted to ask you something," I said. "Why now? Why did you come in July?"

There was a very small pause. Not long. The length of a man deciding which true thing to say.

"Things change up here," he said pleasantly. "That's all. The market changes. Insurance is getting difficult for people on the hill. Some families find it's a good moment to think about what they want."

"And if the house burned down," I said. "Would your buyers still be interested?"

Another small pause.

"My buyers are interested in the land, Mr. Kamali," he said. "The land is always there."

I thanked him. I told him I'd think about it. I hung up. I put the card in my mother's notebook, in the pocket at the back, next to the other one from 2018.

The kitchen table. That night, the fifth, we sat down at the kitchen table, all four of us. My wife, my mother, my daughter, me. Three generations of the family in the glass house, at the same table my father had eaten breakfast at for forty-four years, knocking on the steel column on his way past.

My wife asked the question, because somebody had to. "Do we sell?"

We talked about it for a long time. My wife was for selling. She'd never loved the house the way I did; it was my father's, and my mother's, and in some way it had never quite been hers. Tara was against. She said it was the best view at school and she'd only just got it. I didn't know. I said so. I said I'd watched it burn and I'd watched it stand and I didn't know which one was true.

My mother listened to all of it with her hands folded on the brown notebook.

Then she said: "We leave on the sixth. In the evening, before the wind. All of us. We go to a hotel. We take the albums and the papers. We don't wait to be told."

Nobody argued. It wasn't a suggestion.

"And afterward?" my wife said.

"If the house is here in February," my mother said, "we sell it. In the spring. To a family. Not to him." She tapped the notebook where the cards were. "Not to anyone with a watch like that. To a family who wants to live here and knows what they're buying. We tell them about the brush. We tell them about the wind. We give them the pamphlet." She paused. "We tell them about the flowers."

"And if it isn't here?" I said. "In February?"

My mother looked out through the glass wall, up the dark hill, at the ridge where the white flowers were still open.

"Then it stood forty-five years," she said. "And it was a good house. And we were in it together." She put her hand on mine. "We left one country already, Omid-jān. We can leave a hill."

Nobody said anything for a while. Then Tara said, "Can I at least keep the view until the spring?"

My mother laughed. It was the first time I'd heard her laugh since before my father died. It was a real laugh, loud, the one she used to use in the old days when one of her students played a wrong note so badly it was funny.

"Yes, azizam [aa-zee-ZAM]," she said. "Keep the view."

29. The Sixth

Ray

The wind came at about nine, the way it had before. The long soft roar down the canyon. The bay doors rattling in their tracks. The flag standing straight out from the pole like it had been ironed that way.

There were three extra engines parked in our lot. Three engines from across the city, with crews on them, eating my chili. There were men on cots in the day room who should have gone home at eight that morning. At the top of the Highlands, two water tenders sat at the end of a dead-end street, full, with their crews asleep in the cabs.

It wasn't enough. I knew it wasn't enough. If the fire came the way it came before, with the wind throwing embers a mile ahead, into twenty places at once, three engines and two tenders were a few buckets against a flood.

But it was a few buckets more than last time. And the ridge had been walked, and dug, and flown, and walked again.

At about ten I drove up the trail road one last time in my own truck, against every rule in the book, in a wind that tried to push me off it, and I walked out onto the burn with my flashlight. The wind was so strong I had to lean into it to stay standing. The ash was blowing off the ground in grey sheets, stinging my face. The old stumps we'd dug out lay on their sides where we'd left them, their roots in the air like upturned hands.

I took my glove off and put my hand on the rock.

Cold.

I stood there with my hand on it for a long time, in the dark, in the wind, the white flowers trembling all around me, turned toward the houses below.

Cold. It was cold. I told myself that, over and over. *It's cold*. And I knew, the whole time I was telling myself, that a rock can be cold and a root under it can be warm, and that a thumb of fire in a pencil of dark can lie very quiet for a very long time, and that I was one man with a flashlight and a bare hand on a very big mountain.

I drove back down. I didn't go to bed. I sat in the brown recliner in the day room with my boots on, all night, awake, listening to the wind working at the building, finding every seam.

I didn't eat any cake.

Omid

We left at six in the evening, before the wind. All four of us, and the albums, and the papers, and my mother's notebook, in two cars.

My mother walked through the house before we left. Every room. Slowly. She touched things — the back of the sofa, the kitchen counter, the frame of Tara's door. At the piano she stopped and lifted the lid and played something. Not a whole piece. A few bars. A nocturne. The one she used to hum on the deck. She played it very slowly, the way she always told her students to play it, not rushing.

Then she closed the lid and put her reading glasses on top of it, where she always leaves them, and walked out through the front door, and didn't look back.

At the bottom of the driveway I stopped the car and looked back at the house, because you do.

The hotel was in Santa Monica, four blocks from the beach. The same hotel. I'd booked it on the second of January, the day I came down from the ridge, and they'd given me a room at the ordinary price, because nobody else had booked yet, because there was no reason to. It was a small room with two beds and a window that looked out on the back of another hotel.

At nine the wind came. We heard it even in Santa Monica, a long roar coming down from the hills, and the palm trees in the street outside bending over like old men.

At eleven I opened the camera app.

Six windows. Six little squares. My house.

CAM 1, the front gate. Dark. The plants thrashing in the wind.

CAM 2, the driveway. Empty. The hydrant at the curb, just a shape.

CAM 3, the back deck, looking up the hill. The deck furniture without its cushions. The railing. And above it, the dark ridge, black against the orange glow of the city lights on the clouds, and nothing on it. No glow. No spark.

CAM 4, the side yard. Two stumps where the pines had been, and bare earth.

CAM 5, the garage. My father's workbench. The Christmas decorations in their box.

CAM 6, the living room, looking out through the big glass wall. The sofa. The rug. The Steinway with its lid down and my mother's reading glasses on top.

At about a quarter past eleven, as I watched, the picture in CAM 6 flickered. The lights in the living room went out and came back on. A power flicker, up on the hill, in the wind.

And reflected in the dark glass of the wall, faint, like a ghost of the room behind the camera, I could just see them. The clocks. The microwave and the oven. Blinking. The way they do after an outage, when they've lost their minds and have to be told again what time it is.

12:12. 12:12. 12:12.

My mother was sitting in the chair behind me with the albums on her knees. She'd seen it over my shoulder. She didn't say anything. She reached out and put her hand on my back, between my shoulder blades, the way she used to when I was a boy and couldn't sleep.

I didn't sleep. I sat on the edge of the hotel bed all night with my phone in my hand, watching six small squares of my house, while the wind came down off the mountain and the palm trees bent over in the street, and somewhere in the dark above the Palisades a ridge full of white flowers waited, very sweet, for the morning.

30. Ten Twenty-Nine

Ray

Seven o'clock. Grey light. The wind is worse than the night. A palm frond as long as a canoe comes down across the station's driveway and lies there like a dead thing.

I take one of the extra engines up to the top of the Highlands. I don't ask. I park it in the driveway of the steel house, the one with the glass wall and the cameras. I've never been here in daylight in

this version. The house is beautiful. I didn't know that. The last time I stood here, the pines were about to go.

The hydrant at the curb is there. I have a man check it. Good pressure. For now.

Nine o'clock. The sky is going the colour of a dirty nickel.

Ten o'clock. The wind is trying to take the engine off the hill. We stand in its shelter and watch the ridge. My probationer beside me. He's got his glove off already, the way I taught him. I don't know what he thinks he's going to feel from here.

I look up at the camera over the garage. The little glass eye. I don't know if anyone's watching. I lift my hand, a small wave, like a fool.

"Cap," he says. "What are we waiting for?"

"Nothing," I say. "Hopefully nothing."

. . .

Omid

Ten o'clock. Santa Monica. The hotel room. My wife and Tara asleep, finally, on one bed. My mother in the chair, awake, the albums on her knees.

On my phone, in a small square, CAM 2. A fire engine in my driveway. A man in yellow, grey-haired, standing by the hydrant, looking up into the camera. He lifts his hand. A small wave.

I wave back, at the phone, in a hotel room eight miles away. He can't see me. It doesn't matter.

CAM 3. The back deck. Looking up the hill. The ridge, black against a brown sky. The dug-out stumps near the top, their roots in the air. And all along the trail, on either side of it, the white flowers.

They're still open. In the morning. In the wind. In January.

. . .

Ray

Ten twenty.

Ten twenty-five.

The wind drops for a second, the way it does sometimes, a breath held between gusts, and in the silence I can hear everything. The engine idling. The probationer's breathing. A dog barking somewhere down the canyon. The dry brush on the hillside moving against itself, a sound like somebody slowly crumpling cellophane.

I look up at the ridge.

. . .

Omid

My mother puts her hand on my back, between my shoulder blades.

On CAM 3, in the small white numbers in the corner of the window, the camera is keeping time.

10:29.

The wind comes back.

GLOSSARY

Āzar [aa-ZAR] — Persian, *fire*. Omid's mother's name.

azizam [aa-zee-ZAM] — Persian, *my dear one*. An endearment, used to a child or someone loved.

chamise [shuh-MEEZ] — from the Spanish, *brushwood*. A tough, oily evergreen shrub that covers the dry hills of Southern California and burns very hot.

chaparral [SHAP-uh-RAL] — from the Spanish, *place of scrub oak*. The dense, drought-hardy shrubland of the California hills, which grows for decades between fires and needs fire to renew itself.

Chumash [CHOO-mash] — The Indigenous people of the coast north and west of Los Angeles, from Malibu to San Luis Obispo, who used datura in ceremonies to see what was coming.

datura [duh-TOO-ruh] — from the Hindi, *the thorn-apple plant*. Sacred datura, a native Southern California wildflower with large white trumpet flowers that open at night in summer. Every part of it is poisonous.

jān [JAAN] — Persian, *soul, life*. Added after a name as an endearment, as in Omid-jān.

Kamali [kaa-maa-LEE] — The family name of Parviz, Āzar, Omid and Tara.

Kashan [kaa-SHAAN] — An old desert town in central Iran, known for its carpets and rosewater, where Āzar's family came from.

Maman [maa-MAAN] — Persian, from the French, *mother*. What Omid calls Āzar.

momoy [MO-moy] — Chumash, *datura*. The Chumash name for the plant and for the drink made from it.

Omid [oh-MEED] — Persian, *hope*. The narrator's name.

Parviz [par-VEEZ] — Persian, *victorious*. Omid’s father, the engineer who built the house.

sāl-e no mobārak [SAAL-eh no mo-baa-RAK] — Persian, *blessed new year*. The ordinary Persian greeting for the new year.

Santa Ana [SAN-tuh AN-uh] — Spanish, *Saint Anne*. The hot, very dry wind that pours down from the inland deserts toward the Southern California coast in autumn and winter.

Tara [TAA-raa] — Persian, *star*. Omid’s daughter.

Tātureh [taa-too-REH] — Persian, *datura*. What Āzar calls the white flowers on the ridge.

Tehran [teh-RAAN] — The capital of Iran, where Parviz and Āzar grew up.

Tongva [TONG-vuh] — The Indigenous people of the Los Angeles basin, who lived along its rivers for thousands of years and used small, controlled fires to tend the land.

For forty-five years the Kamali family has lived in a glass house on a steel frame, high in the hills above Pacific Palisades. Parviz built it to stand a hundred years. His widow still teaches piano at the window. Their son Omid makes fake explosions sound real for a living.

Down the canyon, Captain Ray Maddox has spent twenty-seven years learning that a fire is never put out. It is only stopped.

It has not rained in eight months. The insurance letters came in the spring. A man with a good watch has been knocking on doors.

On the ridge above the Highlands, the white flowers that only bloom in summer are open in January.

Then the wind comes.

I did not choose the night. Somebody else struck the match.

