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No. 118



ESFAND

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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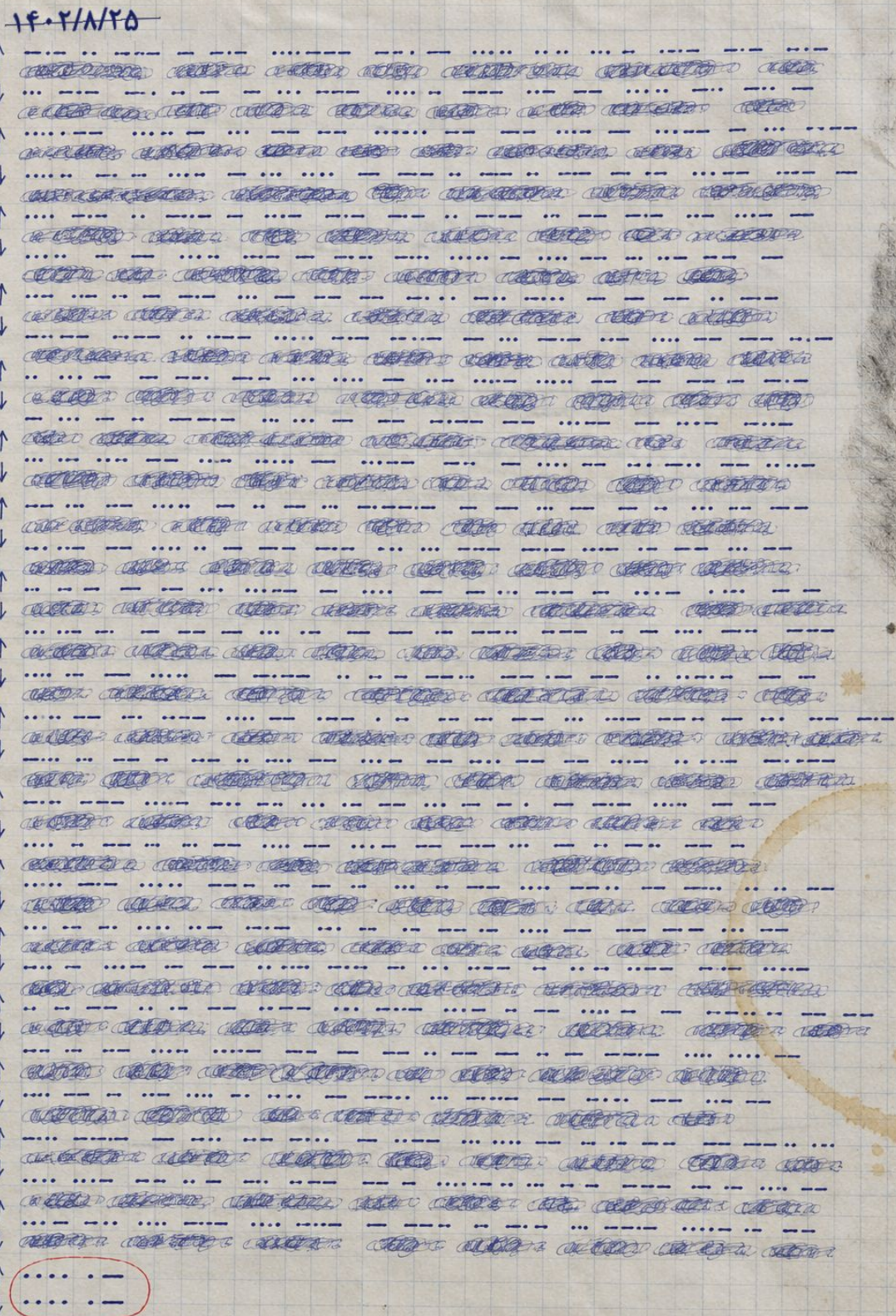
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A page from the exercise books kept in the study.
One Thursday night, written down as it was heard, between eleven and midnight.
Both sides of the conversation.

SYNOPSIS

Nasrin is twenty-two and from the part of Tehran where the money never went. The job is in the part where it did: nanny to a six-year-old girl in a walled house on Fereshteh Street, in the north of the city, for three times what she made at the beauty salon. The old man who owns it looks at her once and then at the wall. The cook, Touran, has been there thirty years. The little girl takes her hand on the stairs.

Small wrong things. Touran cooks for one more than lives in the house. There is a photograph of three boys that nobody explains. And every night at eleven the pipes knock — four, a pause, two — and the child says it is the house saying goodnight.

The maids on the street have a name for the place. They have heard it for years. The owners have never once asked.

What Nasrin finds at the end of the back corridor has been there since 2004. What she decodes, one knock at a time, from the long conversation on Thursday nights, is older and stranger than a secret: it is the thing that has been holding the house up. And when a poor woman finds the holiest thing a rich family owns, she does what poor women do. She names a price.

A noir in four parts about the comfort money buys, the things poverty teaches, and what grows in a room when you leave a child in it for twenty-two years with a plate a day, four hundred books, and nobody to lie to.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began with a film.

Parasite, the Korean film from 2019, is about a poor family who get into a rich house one lie at a time, and about what is already living in that house when they arrive. What stayed with me was not the plot but the shape: funny and then not; every person doing something reasonable and the sum a catastrophe; the rich not cruel and the poor not good; and a floor below the floor that nobody upstairs has ever thought to ask about. Most of all the man in the basement, down there for years, sending messages nobody reads, grateful for the light switch.

I wanted to write toward that man. Not copy him — the film has done him. I wanted to ask what he would actually be, after that long. Not a device; a person. What does a room make, if you give it a child and twenty years?

So this is a book about two kinds of life that share a wall. Upstairs is the comfort money buys: the trees, the quiet, the agreement not to notice things. Downstairs is the other kind: the plate at nine, the bus from Khazaneh [khah-zah-NEH], the price you learn to put on everything because somebody has always put one on you. The film taught me that these two lives are not opposites. They are the same house, each holding the other up, and under each is a thing it cannot look at, and the thing is usually a person.

Here that person is Zal [ZAHL], and he was built from two things. The first is what is actually known about children raised in isolation; the real cases are in the second interlude, and every strange thing he does has a precedent in somebody who lived. The second is a book — one book, on the table in the cellar, read more than two hundred times, the only account of people and what they do to each other that he has ever had. I am not going to name it here. Nasrin does not learn what it is until very late, and neither should you; when it comes, it is told plainly for anyone who has not read it. I will say only that I chose it because a boy with nothing else would not read it as a story. He would read it as instructions. And

that the words are old enough to borrow, and I have borrowed several, and they are his now.

One more thing, said carefully. This is a book about a house with two kinds of life in it, and about the thing both kinds keep in the cellar — the thought that says plainly what the person upstairs will not: *kept, or thrown away*. Everyone in the house has it. Everyone in the street has it. I think everyone has it. The book is about what happens when a family builds a room for that thought and feeds it, and what it does when it is let out.

I should say plainly what is in this book, because it goes further than most on this list. There is a shelf of small skulls and the reader is told what they were. There is sex between a woman and a man who has never seen a body, written without romance. There is a child who died and a brother who feels nothing about it and says so. A woman dies on a mountain road and another dies in her bed, and the book does not tell you how much of either was arranged, because nobody in the house will ever ask. If you would rather not go down the stairs, this is the place to stop.

The Morse is real: H is four shorts and A is a short and a long, and *ha* — yes, the way you say it to the next room — is the shortest word in the code that means anything in Persian. I found that while writing, the way Nasrin finds it. The tap code of Hanoi is real, and the sign-offs. The arghavan [ar-ghah-VAHN] is, for the record, purple. Touran does not look.

I do not know whether Zal is to blame for anything. The old man made the decision; Touran kept him alive; his brother kept him company and kept him down; a street of servants heard the house knock for twenty years and never asked, because the owners never asked, and the owners never asked because nobody listens to pipes. He is what they made. Every one of them is a nicer person than he is. I have tried to write it so that both of those are true at once, because that is how it seemed to me, and because I think that is how it usually is.

Chew Z

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I. THE BEST JOB

1

The wall came first. That is how it is with those houses. You see the wall before you see anything else, and the wall is the house telling you what it thinks of you.

This one was the colour of old bone and twice my height, with glass set into the top of it, green and brown, the bottoms of bottles broken off and pushed into the cement while it was wet. Somebody had done that by hand a long time ago. I stood on the pavement in my good shoes and looked up at the glass and thought: a person did that. A person knelt up there with a bucket of broken bottles and made sure.

Fereshteh [feh-resh-TEH] Street — the name means *angel* — runs along the slope in Elahieh [eh-lah-hee-YEH], which is the part of Tehran where the money went when it wanted trees and air. The streets curve up toward the mountain. There are no shops. You can walk for twenty minutes and see nobody except other women like me, in headscarves and sensible shoes, carrying the shopping of people whose cars cost more than our mothers' houses. I had come on two buses and the whole length of the Metro from Khazaneh [khah-zah-NEH], which is the part of the city where the money never went at all, down below the railway where the air in summer tastes of the brick kilns, up to Tajrish [taj-REESH] at the top, where the line ends because the mountain starts, and the trip had taken two hours and ten minutes, and I had counted every one of them because that is what I do. I count. My mother says I was counting before I could talk.

There was a small door in the big gate, and a button, and a camera the size of my thumb. I pressed the button. Nothing happened for a long time. Then the small door opened by itself, with a sound like a lock giving up, and I went in.

The house was set back behind a garden that had been made to look wild and had cost a great deal to look that way. There was an arghavan [ar-ghah-VAHN] tree, bare, because it was January. There was a path of flat grey stones. There was a man standing at the top of the steps in a cardigan, and he was old, and he looked at me once, the whole of me, from the shoes up, and then he looked at the wall beside my head and kept looking at it while he spoke.

“You are the girl from the agency.”

“Yes, Agha.” *Agha* [ah-GHAH] — sir; what you call the man of a house.

“You have references.”

“Yes, Agha. Two.”

“Touran [too-RAHN] will see them.” He turned and went inside. He walked carefully, the way old men walk when they have decided not to use a stick. I never heard anyone call him by his name in all the time I was in that house. He was *the Agha* to Touran, *Baba* to his son, *Baba-bozorg* [bah-BAH boh-ZORG] — grandfather — to the little girl, and to me he was the old man, from the first minute, and I never thought of him as anything else.

Touran saw my references in the kitchen. She was a wide woman in her sixties with her hair pulled back so tight it lifted her eyebrows, and she read the two letters slowly, moving her lips, and then she folded them and put them in the pocket of her apron and did not give them back.

“You cook?”

“A little.”

“You don’t need to cook. I cook. You need to keep the child alive and quiet and clean, in that order. You can read?”

“Yes.”

“She likes to be read to. The last one couldn’t read properly. She would skip the long words.” Touran looked at me the way the old man had not — straight on, taking her time. “You’re small.”

“I’m strong.”

“That isn’t what I said.” But she nodded, and that was the interview, or I thought it was.

It was not. The interview was the stairs.

They sent me up to meet the child. The stairs were wide and dark wood and turned twice, and on the first landing there was a little girl sitting with her knees up, waiting, the way children wait when they have been told to wait and have decided to do it exactly. She

was six. She had a drawing in her hand and the drawing was of a house, and the house had a face.

“Are you the new one?”

“I think so.”

“The last one was called Fatemeh [fah-teh-MEH]. She skipped the long words.”

“I heard.”

“What’s your name?”

“Nasrin.” Nas-REEN; it is a flower, a wild rose, and it is the most ordinary name in the city.

She considered it. “That’s short.”

“It’s all I’ve got.”

She stood up and took my hand. She did not ask; she took it, the way you take the rail of a bus. Her hand was warm and a little sticky and she held on hard. “I’m Yasmin,” she said, and she said it the way you say a thing that has been said to you many times, by many people, carefully: *yas-MEEN*. “I’ll show you where everything is. You’re not allowed in the back part. Nobody is. That’s where Touran lives.”

She took me up the second flight. At the top I looked down and the old man was standing in the hall below, looking up at us, at her hand in mine, and he had the face of a man watching a sum come out.

They offered me three times what I had made at the beauty salon. I said yes before Touran had finished saying the number. I am not proud of that. I am not ashamed of it either. You do not grow up where I grew up and stay proud when somebody says a number like that out loud.

2

A servant does not learn a house by its rooms. She learns it by its doors — which ones she may open, which ones she may knock on, which ones she must not be seen near. Nobody gives you the list. You learn it by the way people’s faces change.

The front door was not mine. I came and went by the side, through a gate in the wall that led into the kitchen garden and from there into the kitchen itself. The kitchen was Touran's, which meant it was a kind of shrine: everything had its place, and the place was not up for discussion. The ground floor beyond the kitchen was the old man's — a study with the door always shut, a sitting room with the curtains always half drawn, a dining room where he ate alone at the head of a table for twelve. I went in there to serve and to clear and did not linger.

The first floor was the son's. His name was Babak [BAH-bak]. He was thirty and he was a widower, which I learned on the second day from Touran, who said it the way you say the weather. He had a bedroom and a bathroom and a study of his own, at the end of the corridor, over the laundry. The study door was shut when he was in it and shut when he was not. Yasmin's room was on that floor too, and a room for me beside it, with a bed and a window and a lock that worked, which was more than I had at home.

The second floor was closed. Sheets on the furniture. Nobody went up.

And then there was the back.

The back was the part of the house that Yasmin had told me about on the stairs. You reached it through the kitchen, through a door beside the big refrigerator that I took at first for a pantry. It was not a pantry. It was a corridor, narrow, with a concrete floor instead of tile, and it ran away from the kitchen into the rear of the house where the light did not reach. Off it was the laundry — two machines, a sink, a drying rack, a smell of soap and damp — and past the laundry was Touran's room, and past Touran's room the corridor went on a little further and ended in a door.

"Storage," Touran said, the first time I looked down there. She said it without looking up from the onions. "Old furniture. The khanom's things. Nobody goes." *Khanom* [khah-NOM] — the lady; the mistress of a house.

"The khanom?"

"The Agha's wife. She died. Before your time." She finished the onion. "A long time before."

Yasmin had her own version. “Touran reads down there,” she told me, on the stairs, with great confidence. “At night. The same book. Baba says it’s a very long book.”

I did the laundry myself, from the first week, because Touran’s knees were bad and the machines were low. So I was in that corridor every day. I got to know the sound of it — the hum of the machines, the drip of the sink tap that would not quite close, the particular silence of the far end, where the door was. It was a thick silence, and it had a smell: esfand [es-FAND]. Everybody knows it — the wild rue seed that every house keeps in a jar and throws on the coals against the evil eye, that crackles and pops and gives off a sweet bitter smoke you carry round the rooms and the people. My mother did it every Thursday for my father. Here the smell lived at the end of the corridor and did not go away between Thursdays. I noticed it the way you notice a cold spot in a swimming pool. I noticed it and I did not go near it, because I had been in a house like this before, and in that house I had gone near something, and I had said what I saw, and I had been out on the pavement with my bag by the end of the afternoon with a reference that said I was *unreliable.*

I had learned. Or I thought I had.

3

Let me tell you about Touran, because she is the reason for everything, and because I loved her, and because she is dead now and nobody else is going to.

She had been in that house for thirty years. She had come as a young woman from a village near Hamedan [hah-meh-DAHN], in the west, that she never named, and she had cooked for the old man’s wife when the old man’s wife was young, and she had cooked for the children when there were children, and now she cooked for an old man who ate alone and a widower who ate standing up and a little girl who ate what she was told. She had a crooked ring finger that she said she had broken on a drawer. She had two bad knees that she said nothing about at all; you knew by the way she came down the back stairs, one step, both feet, the next step, both feet, with a hand on the wall. She wore the same grey cardigan every day

over her apron and she had a radio on the windowsill that played old songs from before the revolution, the ones you cannot buy any more and everyone has — very quietly, all day, so that the kitchen always sounded like somebody else's memory.

She ran that kitchen the way a mullah runs a mourning. Everything in order. Everything at its time. The old man's coffee at seven, in the blue cup. Babak's at seven-fifteen, black, in the car on his way out, in a paper cup she had ready by the side door. Yasmin's tea at eight. Lunch at two. Dinner at eight-thirty. Nothing was ever late and nothing was ever asked for twice.

And every day, at nine at night, when the house had eaten and the dishes were done, she made one more plate.

On Thursdays she did one thing more. She took the little brass dish with the holes in the lid down from above the stove, and put three coals in it from the gas, and when they were red she threw a fistful of esfand on them from the jar and let it crackle, and carried the smoking dish through the door beside the refrigerator into the back, and I heard her go down the corridor with it, slowly, and come back without it. For the eye, she said, when she saw me looking. Thursday night is for the dead; you know that. The smoke went down the corridor and stayed there.

I noticed it on the third day. I notice things. It is not a virtue. It is a problem I have, like the counting.

The old man had eaten. Babak had eaten. Yasmin had eaten and was asleep. Touran had eaten standing at the counter, the way she always did, as if sitting down to food would be admitting something. And then she took a clean plate from the rack and put food on it — a good amount, more than she had eaten herself, rice and a ladle of khoresh [khoh-RESH] — the stew that goes on rice — and two pieces of chicken and a round of bread folded over — and she covered it with another plate turned upside down, and she set it on the end of the counter by the door to the back, and she went on wiping down the stove as though she had done nothing at all.

I did not say anything. I went up to bed.

The next night she did it again. And the next. Rice, stew, meat, a round of bread, the plate on top, the end of the counter. I was

clearing up beside her and I kept my eyes on my hands. The fourth night, when I came down early for a glass of water at a quarter to one, the plate was gone and the counter was wiped.

She cooked for six in a house of five. Every night. For thirty years, I would learn later — though she had cooked for more, once, when there had been more.

I did not ask her. I want to be clear about that, because of everything that came afterwards, because people will want to know when I knew and what I did about it. I did not ask. I had been taught not to ask, by a woman in a house in Zafaraniyeh [zah-fah-rah-nee-YEH] — the rich district next to Fereshteh — who had put me out on the street for asking, and I had decided — the way you decide things when you are twenty-two and poor and have a mother with a bad roof — that I would never ask anything in a rich house again. Whatever that plate was for, it was Touran's. It was none of mine.

That is what I told myself. It is also true that I was afraid. I did not know yet what I was afraid of. The house had not told me. But I had the feeling you get in the Metro when the man beside you has not moved for three stops and you have stopped being able to look anywhere but at your own hands.

4

There was a photograph in the upstairs hall, on the wall outside Babak's study, at the height of a grown man's eyes, which meant I had to look up at it.

Three boys. Two of them about the same size and one much smaller, with his arms around the neck of the middle one, laughing, his face pushed into the bigger boy's shoulder. A garden behind them — this garden, I thought, the arghavan in flower, so it was spring. The bigger boys were squinting into the sun. The little one had his eyes shut. The frame was silver and somebody polished it; there were no fingerprints on the glass.

Nobody told me who they were. Yasmin, who told me everything, walked past it every day as if it were a window.

But I saw the old man stop there. I was coming out of Yasmin's room with her laundry and he was coming along the corridor from the stairs, slowly, and he stopped in front of the photograph, and he lifted his hand and put two fingers on the glass, on the little one, on the laughing face with the eyes shut. He held them there. Then he took them away and went on to wherever he was going, and he had not seen me, or he had and it did not matter, because I was the help, and the help is furniture.

That night I looked at the photograph again, on my own. There was a fingerprint on the glass now. Two. Right over the small boy. The next morning they were gone.

So that was a thing that happened in that house: the old man touched the photograph, and somebody — Touran, I supposed — wiped it, and nobody said a word, and the house went on. I understood, then, the first rule of the place, though I could not have put it in words yet. Everybody in that house had agreed not to notice something. They had agreed so long ago that the agreement had become the walls.

There was another photograph, in Yasmin's room, on the shelf beside her bed, where she could see it lying down. A young woman, dark hair, laughing, a baby on her hip. The baby was Yasmin.

"Who's that?" I asked, the first night I put her to bed, because that was the kind of photograph you are allowed to ask about.

"Maman." She said it without any weight at all. "She died in the car. I was two. I don't remember her." She turned over, as if that were the end of it, and then turned back. "Baba says she was funny. I think I'd remember if she was funny."

"Not if you were two."

"That's what Touran says." And she shut her eyes, and that was that.

Two photographs, then. A little boy with his eyes shut, and a young woman with a baby. Two dead people on two different floors. I did not put them together. There was no reason to. Rich families have their dead the same as anyone; they just have better frames.

5

The house knocked at eleven.

I heard it the first night and thought it was the pipes. Every old building in Tehran has pipes that knock. You turn off a tap and somewhere in the wall there is a sound like a fist. That is what it was, I decided, lying in my new bed in the dark with the window open to the cold and the smell of wet garden coming in. A pipe.

Four knocks. A pause. Two.

I heard it the second night at the same time and it was the same: four, a pause, two. Not a fist. Too neat for a fist. The sound came from below me and to the side, from the direction of the back of the house, and it came up through the floor the way sound comes up through water — soft, with the edges taken off.

The third night I was lying beside Yasmin because she had had a bad dream and wanted somebody there until she slept. It was a Thursday. Before the knock came there was something else, so faint I took it for a radio in another house: a stringed instrument, a few notes, slow, stopping and starting, from the end of our own corridor. A setar [seh-TAR] — the small long-necked lute with four strings that is played alone, in a room, with the nail of one finger, and sounds like somebody thinking. Four notes. Then nothing. Then the knock came. Four. A pause. Two. And Yasmin, with her eyes shut and her voice thick, said: “That’s the house saying goodnight.”

And a minute after it, something else — a long, uneven knocking from somewhere below, that stopped and was answered and went on — which I took for the pipes settling, because that was the night I wanted it to be.

I lay very still.

“Who told you that?”

“Baba.” She was almost gone. “It does it every night. It’s saying goodnight. You’re supposed to say it back.”

“Do you?”

“In my head.”

She slept. I did not. I lay there and listened to the house not knocking any more, and I counted — I could not help it — the seconds between the four and the two. One. Just one. Every night, one second. The same.

Here is a thing about me. I grew up in a building in Khazaneh with eleven families in it and walls you could hear a man think through. I know what a building sounds like when it is only a building. Pipes knock when water moves; they knock in a mess, in a hurry, they rattle and stop. They do not knock four times, wait one second, and knock twice, at eleven o'clock, every night, as if they had a watch.

Somebody was doing that.

I did not go and look. I want to be honest about that too. I lay in a child's bed in a rich man's house with her hot little hand on my arm and I thought: somebody is doing that, and everybody in this house knows it, and they have told the child it is the house saying goodnight, and the child believes them, and I am not going to be the one who asks. I am going to lie here, and I am going to say it back in my head, like she does.

Goodnight.

And I did. God help me, I did. I said it back in my head to whoever was knocking, and I went to sleep, and I slept fine.

6

On Fridays the maids of Fereshteh go to the park.

It is not a rule. Nobody tells you. You just find yourself there, on the first Friday afternoon of your first week, in your own manteau [man-TOH] — the long coat we wear outside — for once, on a bench by the fountain in the little park at the bottom of the hill, and there are the others — women in their own clothes, from Afghanistan and the villages of Lorestan [loh-res-TAHN], and from the far south of the city — eating ice cream out of paper cups and talking about their houses. Not their homes. Their houses. The ones they work in. Every woman in that park belonged, in the way that mattered that day, to a house.

They knew mine before I said the address.

“The bone wall,” said a woman from the house across the street, who had been there nine years. “With the glass on top.”

“Yes.”

“With Touran.”

“You know Touran?”

“Everybody knows Touran. Touran’s been there since God was a boy.” She licked her spoon. She had a way of looking at you sideways while she talked, as if checking who else was listening. “So you’ve heard it, then.”

“Heard what?”

She smiled. It was not an unkind smile. It was the smile you give a girl who has got a job that pays three times the beauty salon and has not yet worked out why.

“*Khaneh-ye dar-zan* [khah-NEH-yeh dar-ZAN],” she said. The house that knocks. “That’s what we call it. Everybody on the street. You can hear it from the back bedrooms in my house if the window’s open. Eleven o’clock. Been doing it for years.”

“Years?”

“Since before I came. Ashraf [ash-RAF] Khanom” — she tipped her head at a woman at the next bench, older, in a blue dress — “she was at the Sadeghi [sah-deh-GHEE] house two doors up for fifteen years, she says it was knocking when she started. Four and two. Every night.”

“What is it?”

The woman shrugged. “Pipes, Touran says.”

“It’s not pipes.”

“No.” She looked at me sideways. “It’s not pipes.”

“Then what —“

“Dokhtaram [dokh-tah-RAM],” she said — *my daughter*, the way older women say it to younger ones, kind and final — “do you know how long I’ve been across the street? Nine years. Do you know how many times the owners of my house have asked me what that sound is, in the night, that they can hear from their own bedroom with

their own ears? Never. Not once. Nine years.” She finished her ice cream and set the cup down beside her on the bench. “The owners never ask. That’s the thing about that street. They never do. So we don’t either.”

I sat with that. The fountain went on. A child somewhere was crying about a balloon.

“There was one who asked,” the older woman in the blue dress said. Ashraf Khanom. She had not seemed to be listening. She was looking at the fountain. “A girl. At the bone wall. Ten years ago now. A maid, not a nanny — this was before the child. She asked Touran about it. Then she asked the son.”

“And?”

“And she was gone by the next Friday.” Ashraf Khanom turned and looked at me for the first time. Her face was quite calm. “With a good reference. Touran told us. A very good reference. She’s in Rasht [RASHT] now, I heard. Doing well.”

Nobody said anything for a while.

“Well,” said the woman from across the street, standing up, brushing off her skirt. “It’s a good house. Touran’s fair. The old man’s quiet. The son’s never there. The child’s sweet. You could do a lot worse, dokhtaram. We all could.” She looked down at me. “Just say goodnight back and go to sleep. That’s what the little one does, isn’t it? Say goodnight back. Eleven o’clock. That’s all it wants.”

She went. The others drifted after her. I sat on the bench until the light went and I had counted every stone in the rim of the fountain, twice, and the number was the same both times, which was something.

7

Thursday was different. I had known for two weeks that Thursday was different and had not let myself know it.

On Thursdays the knock at eleven was not four and two. It was four and two, and then, after a minute — after the house had settled, after I had said *goodnight* back in my head like a fool — it started again, and it did not stop. It went on. Long and short, long and

short, in bursts and pauses, like rain starting and stopping on a tin roof, from below and to the side, from the back; and then, when it paused, something *answered* it. From above. From the end of the corridor on my own floor, from the direction of the study over the laundry where Babak shut himself in on Thursdays with a glass he did not drink from. Faint, through the wall. The same kind of sound. Long and short. And then the one below would start again.

It went on for an hour. Sometimes more. I lay in my bed and listened to two people talk in a language of knocking, one of them under the floor and one of them down the hall, and I did not understand a word of it and I understood everything that mattered: it was two. It was a conversation. It had been going on for years.

On the third Thursday I got up.

I do not know why that night and not the others. I have thought about it. I think it was the ice cream woman on the bench saying *just say goodnight back*, and the way she had said it, kind and tired, like a woman telling you how to live with a husband who hits. I think something in me, the part that counts, had added up the plate and the photograph and the fingerprints and the knock and the girl who went to Rasht with a good reference, and had got a number, and did not like it.

I went down the back stairs in my socks. The kitchen was dark except for the clock on the stove. The plate was not on the counter. It was ten past midnight.

The door beside the refrigerator was open a hand's width.

I went through it into the corridor. Concrete under my feet, cold through the socks. The laundry machines were silent. Touran's door was shut, but there was no line of light under it, and when I put my ear close I heard nothing — no radio, no breathing, nothing; she was not in there. The knocking had stopped some time ago. The thick silence at the end of the corridor was the only thing in the house that was awake.

The door at the end was not shut.

It was a plain wooden door with a plain brass handle and it stood open a few inches on darkness, and from the darkness came a smell — not bad, not what you would think; damp stone and candle wax

and old paper, and under all of it esfand, thick, fifty-two Thursdays a year for twenty-two years of it with nowhere to go but down — and a faint moving light, yellow, low down, that came and went as if somebody were walking past it with a candle. And a voice. Touran's. Low, the way you talk to someone in a hospital. I could not hear the words. And then another voice answered her, and that one I could hear, because it was closer to the door, and because it was clear, every word of it, in a Persian nobody speaks any more, the Persian of the old radio plays, careful and complete, every syllable finished:

"— then she is early. Tell her to come down. The stairs are steep; she should keep her hand on the wall."

I had not made a sound. I was sure I had not made a sound.

Touran came to the door. She looked at me standing in the corridor in my socks with my hand against the wall where I had put it without deciding to, and her face did not change at all. It had the look of a woman who has been waiting a long time for a particular bus and has just seen it turn the corner.

"Well," she said. "Come on, then. He's right about the stairs."

She went back in. The light moved. I stood for a moment longer in the cold, and then I went through the door, and found the top of a flight of stone steps going down into a yellow glow, and I put my hand on the wall, as I had been told, and I went down. At the bottom was a second door, a heavier one, standing open against the wall, and the room was through it.

The room at the bottom had been a wine cellar once. You could see where the racks had been. Now there were shelves — books, hundreds of them, in no order I could see — and a bed made with military tightness, and a table with a candle on it, and a bucket in the corner with a lid, and a square of grey high in the far wall where a vent let in what passed, down here, for light. It smelled of paper and stone and a man.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed with a book open on his knee — a thick one, swollen with damp, the cover gone and the spine held with tape, the pages the colour of tea — and he looked up at me when I reached the bottom step. He was twenty-eight years old — I knew that later; that night I could not have told you if he was

twenty or forty. He was pale the way nothing above ground is pale, the colour of the inside of a shell. He was thin and very still and he had a long face with Babak's bones in it, and the old man's, and the little boy's in the silver frame. His hair had been cut by somebody who loved him and could not see very well. His eyes were dark and quite calm and they did not look at my face. They looked, I understood much later, at my feet, and my hands, and the rise of my breathing, which were the things that told him anything.

"You are early," he said, politely, in that old careful Persian. "Touran does not usually bring the plate until a quarter past. But it is all right. I have finished the chapter." He closed the book, keeping his place with one finger. "You are the new one. Nasrin. The child says you do not skip the long words."

I did not say anything. I could not have.

"That is good," he said. "I do not either." He laid his hand flat on the open page, the way you would on a cat, to keep it still. "There are a great many long words in this one."

Behind me, Touran set the plate down on the table and lifted the top one off it, and the smell of rice and khoresh filled the stone room, and the man on the bed turned his head toward it the way a plant turns toward a window — and that was the moment, that small animal movement, when I understood that whatever was in this cellar had been in it for a very long time.

TAP CODE — I

The prisoners who talked through walls

A short note before the story goes on. This book is about two people who talk through a pipe. It has been done before, by real people, in worse rooms than a wine cellar. Here is how.

In 1965 an American pilot was shot down over North Vietnam and put in a prison the prisoners called the Hanoi Hilton. His name was Carlyle Harris; the others called him Smitty. He was kept alone. Everyone was kept alone. That was the point of the place: a man alone will break, and a man who can talk to another man will not.

Harris remembered something. An Air Force instructor had once shown him, almost as an aside, a code that prisoners had used in an earlier war. It was simple enough to learn in an afternoon and simple enough to send with a knuckle on a wall.

You write the alphabet in a square, five across and five down. Twenty-five boxes. The letter K is left out — you use C instead — so that twenty-six letters fit in twenty-five squares.

A B C D E
F G H I J
L M N O P
Q R S T U
V W X Y Z

To send a letter you tap twice. The first taps say which row. The second taps say which box along the row. So A is one tap, pause, one tap. The letter O is three taps — third row — pause, four taps — fourth box along. You do not need to remember dots and dashes. You only need to count.

Harris taught it to the next man through the wall, and that man taught the next, and inside a year every American in that prison could talk to the man in the next cell without a sound a guard could name. They tapped the news. They tapped jokes. One of them said afterwards that the building sounded like a den of woodpeckers. When a man was taken away for interrogation the others tapped to him when he came back, *we are here, we are here*, until he could answer. One of them, a navy commander called Stockdale, was held for eight years, about four of them alone, and tapped his way

through them; he said the tapping carried everything a voice could — elation, sadness, humour, sarcasm. The men said afterwards that the code had kept them sane. They did not mean it as a figure of speech.

The tap code was not new even then. Russian prisoners under the tsars had used a square of their own a hundred years earlier; the revolutionaries learned it in prison and taught it to each other, and it is in their books. In every country that has built a wall between two people and told them not to speak, somebody has worked out how to knock.

The code in this book is not the tap code. It is Morse, which is older — made for the telegraph in the 1830s and 40s — and which uses shorts and longs instead of rows and columns. Morse is harder to learn and easier to send fast once you have learned it, and it is the one that was in a Pishahangi [peesh-ah-han-GEE] manual — the Iranian Scouts, before the revolution — in the 1970s, which is the only reason it matters here. The point is the same. The point is always the same.

A wall is only a wall until there is somebody on the other side of it. Then it is a telephone that has not been picked up yet.

The men in Hanoi had a sign-off. When the tapping was over and the guards were coming, the last thing one man sent to another was three letters. *G.B.U.* God bless you. Some pairs had their own — Stockdale and the man through his wall ended every night with *S.T.*, sleep tight. So that whatever happened before morning, the last thing that had passed through the wall was that.

In the house in this book the sign-off is shorter still. Two letters, four knocks and two. It does not mean God bless. It means *yes*. But it is sent for the same reason, at the same hour, by two men who cannot see each other, and it has been sent every night for twenty years, and nobody above the floor has ever asked what it means.

II. THE ONE WHO KNOCKS

8

Touran told me at the kitchen table at one in the morning, because there was no point in not telling me now.

She made tea. Not for comfort — Touran did not do comfort — but because her hands needed something to do while she said it, and because a story like that goes down better with something hot. She put the cup in front of me and sat, which I had never seen her do, and she folded her hands on the table, the crooked finger on top, and she looked at the stove and not at me and she told it the way you tell a thing you have told yourself every night for twenty-two years and never once out loud.

“There were three boys,” she said. “You’ve seen the photograph. Babak, the oldest. Zal [ZAHL], two years younger — the khanom chose it, out of the old book of kings; it’s the one who was born with white hair and left out on the mountain, and a bird raised him. She said it was a strong name. The old man never liked it. And the little one. He was four.”

She did not say the little one’s name. She never did, in all the time I knew her. He was *the little one*, the way the old man was *the Agha*, as if a name would have made him too heavy to carry.

“It was April. 2004. The arghavan was out. The khanom — the Agha’s wife — she was alive then, she was downstairs, she had people for lunch. I was in the kitchen. The boys were on the roof. There’s a terrace up there, you haven’t seen it, nobody goes now. They played up there. There was a wall, a low wall, and I’d told the khanom a hundred times it was too low for the little one and she said boys have to learn.” Touran’s hands did not move. “The two big ones were up there with him. Nobody else. And he went over.”

I said nothing. The tea steamed between us.

“I heard the khanom before I heard anything else. Then I was in the garden and the little one was on the stones and the Agha was there and he had his hand on the boy’s chest like he could hold him in. And Babak came down the stairs white as a plate. And then Zal came down behind him, and he was — “ She stopped. For the first time her voice moved. “He was six. He had a face on him I can’t describe to you. Not crying. Like a boy who’d been told something

he didn’t understand yet. And the Agha looked up at the two of them on the steps, and Babak said — “

She stopped again.

“Babak said, *Zal pushed him.*”

The clock on the stove ticked. Somewhere in the walls a pipe settled, an ordinary sound.

“And Zal didn’t say anything. He looked at his brother and he looked at his father and he didn’t say a word. Six years old. He just stood there and let it be true.” Touran unfolded her hands and put them flat on the table. “And the Agha made a decision. Right there. On the stones with his hand on his dead son’s chest. I watched him make it. I’ve never seen a man think so fast in my life.

“No police. No doctor — the little one was gone, there was nothing a doctor could do except write things down. The khanom’s people were sent home; she said the boy had a fever. That night the Agha drove to Nowshahr [now-SHAHR] with the little one wrapped in the back of the car. They have a house there, on the water. And a week later it was in the papers — a tragedy, two children of a good family drowned at Nowshahr, swept off the breakwater in the spring sea, the bodies not recovered. Two. The little one. And Zal.”

“But — “

“There is a grave for each of them in the Behesht-e Zahra [beh-HESHT-eh zah-RAH]. The big cemetery in the south, where the whole city goes. I’ve seen them. White stone. Washed every year on the last Thursday, by a man he pays.” She looked at me then, straight on, the way she had the first day. “And Zal has been down those stairs since that night. The Agha took him down himself. He said, *You will stay here where you can’t hurt anyone else, and Touran will feed you, and that is more than you deserve.* And he gave me an envelope the first of every month from then on, in cash, on top of my wage. And I took it. And I fed him.”

“For twenty-two years.”

“For twenty-two years.” She picked up her cup for the first time and drank, and set it down. “He is a good boy. He has always been a

good boy. Whatever happened on that roof, he was six, and he has never been anything but good to me."

I looked at her hands on the table, and at the crooked finger, and she saw me look, and she said, "A drawer," and I nodded, and we both let that be true as well.

9

I went down alone the next night.

Touran did not stop me. She did not help me either. She put the plate on the end of the counter at nine as she always did, and at a quarter past midnight she went to bed with her door shut and her radio off, and the plate was still there, and the door beside the refrigerator was open a hand's width, and I understood that this was how she had decided to do it. She would not take me down. She would not keep me out. She would leave the door open and go to sleep and let the house decide.

I took the plate.

Before she went to bed, Touran gave me tea. She always did, after that; it was part of going down. Black, in a glass, very sweet, and in the bottom of the glass a pinch of something that did not dissolve — small dark seeds, bitter under the sugar. Esfand. "For the eye," she said, "since you're going near him." My mother had done the same before my father's night shifts. I drank it. I always drank it.

I went down the stone stairs with my hand on the wall.

He was at the table this time, with the candle, and a book, and he did not look up until I had put the plate down and lifted the cover, and then he looked at the food and not at me, and he said, "Thank you," in that voice from an old radio, and he began to eat. He ate carefully. He ate everything, in order — rice, then the stew, then the meat, the bread last, wiping the plate — and when he had finished he set the fork down parallel to the knife and pushed the plate an exact distance away from him, and only then did he look in my direction.

Not at my face. I noticed that the second night as I had the first. His eyes went to my hands, my feet, the middle of me. He looked at my

face the way you look at a page in a language you don’t read — briefly, politely, without expecting anything from it.

“You came back,” he said. “Touran said you might not. She said you had a look.”

“What look?”

“The look of someone adding things up.” He said it without any weight. “She said the last one who had that look went to Rasht. I do not know where that is. It is not in any of my books.”

“It’s north. About three hours.”

“North,” he said, as if filing it. “Thank you.”

I looked at the room, because I could not keep looking at him. The shelves went up to the ceiling on three walls — books, as I had seen the first night, but now I saw that they were not in no order; they were in an order I did not know, by size, or by colour, or by something else. One book was not on the shelves at all. It lay on the table beside the candle, the swollen one with no cover, squared to the table’s edge in reach of his right hand, and I understood from where it lay that it lived there. The bed was made so tight you could have bounced a coin. The floor was swept. The candle sat in a saucer in the exact centre of the table. High on the fourth wall, where the racks had been, a square of darker grey was the vent, and under it a row of small things I could not make out. In the corner, a bucket with a wooden lid.

“What colour is the car?” he said.

“What?”

“Babak’s car. He has had it four years. I know the sound of it very well, going out and coming back, and the sound the gate makes for it. Touran says it is grey, but she said the last one was grey, and I do not think she looks. What colour is it?”

“It’s — blue. Dark blue.”

“Blue.” He closed his eyes for a moment. I would learn that he did this when he was putting something away. “Dark blue. Thank you. That is better than grey.”

I looked at the book on the table. He saw me look; he saw everything.

“You may,” he said.

I turned it toward me. The cover was gone and the title page with it; the first page that was left began in the middle of a sentence, in a Persian older than anyone alive, on paper soft as cloth. A child had written a name inside in pencil and someone had rubbed it out. I did not know what it was. I did not ask. He did not say.

“It came down in the first box,” he said. “With a Quran and a dictionary and some old things of Babak’s. I could not read it for two years; the words were too long. Then I could. I have read it two hundred and eleven times. The Quran forty. The others once or twice.” He took it back from me gently and squared it to the table’s edge. “It is about a man. What he becomes. What he does afterwards. It is the best book that has been written. I have read all the others, so I would know. It is the only account of people and what they do that I have ever had.”

That was how he talked. I had taken it for the radio. It was not the radio. It was that book, read two hundred and eleven times in a Persian from another century — every sentence finished, every word in its coat — and it was, though I did not understand this for a long time, the only account of people and what they do that he had ever had.

And then he stood up, and went to the corner, and lifted the lid of the bucket, and turned his back to me, and used it — standing, the way men do — and went on talking over his shoulder while he did.

“You are from Khazaneh. Touran told me. I know it from the radio; there was a woman on a programme once who came from there, she said the canal comes up into the streets in the spring. Does it still come up?”

I had turned to the wall. I heard the sound of it, and the lid go back on, and his feet on the swept floor coming back to the table, and I understood that nothing had happened as far as he was concerned. He had needed the bucket and he had used it and he had gone on with the conversation, because nobody had ever taught him that this was a thing you stopped a conversation for, and there had been

nobody down here to learn it from. For twenty-two years the only other person in this room had been a woman who changed that bucket every morning and had long since stopped seeing it.

“Yes,” I said to the wall. “It still comes up.”

“I thought it might,” he said, sitting down. “Things like that do not usually stop.”

10

The row of small things under the vent was skulls.

I did not understand what I was looking at the third night, and then I did, and I stood there with the plate in my hands and could not put it down.

They were on a narrow shelf of their own, a plank set into the stone, at the height of his head when he was sitting. Eleven of them. They were in a row, by size, the smallest on the left — a thing the size of a thumbnail — and then larger, and larger, delicate things with long teeth, and then one with a short hooked beak that I knew for a bird, and then at the right-hand end one that was not like the others at all. It was the size of my fist. It had eye sockets I could have put my fingers in, and a long jaw, and the teeth were still in it.

He saw me looking. He saw everything; I had learned that already. Not with his eyes — with whatever he used instead.

“The shelf,” he said. “Touran does not like it either. She asked me to keep them in a box and I said no.” He got up and came and stood beside me and looked at them with me, like a man showing a visitor his garden. “Touran comes once a day. In the beginning, when I was small, she came twice, but the Agha found out and stopped it. Once a day. One plate. It is a good plate, she is generous, but it is once.” He pointed, not touching. “Everything else that comes into this room is food. That is a rule I made when I was eight. It is a good rule. It has kept me alive.”

“These are — “

“Rats, those. They come in under the door; there is a gap, you can see it, Touran has asked for it to be fixed and the Agha does not send anyone down here. One learns to be quick. Those two are

mice, which are not worth the trouble but one does not say no. That one — “ the beak — “came down the air shaft in 2011. A pigeon. It was alive when it arrived. It was the best thing I have ever eaten.” He said this simply. “And that one.”

The one on the end. The one with the teeth.

“A cat,” he said. “In 2017. Somebody’s, I think; it had a collar, I have it in the drawer. It came in under the door after a rat and could not find the way out again, in the fortnight Touran was in the hospital with her knees and a niece of hers left the plate at the top of the stairs without coming down, and it was down here with me for two days, and I fed it from my plate, and then I understood that it was not going to be found and that Touran would not be allowed to take it up, and that I had not had meat that was not chicken in ten years.” He looked at the skull. He had no expression on his face that I could read, but then, I could not read his face at all. “It was harder than the pigeon. Not the doing of it. The deciding. I was fond of it.”

I put the plate down on the table. My hands did it; I was not there.

“I have a question,” he said. “I have wanted to ask someone for a long time and Touran will not discuss it. You have been outside. You have seen both.” He turned toward me. “What is the difference between a cat and a chicken? Apart from the sound.”

And when I did not answer: “In the book a man eats what he is given and is grateful. It is the first thing he learns. I did not have to be taught it. I had the book.”

I went up the stairs. I made it to the laundry sink. I was sick, quietly, with the tap running, and then I rinsed the sink and rinsed my mouth and stood there with my hands on the cold edge of it in the dark.

And then I went back down. The next night. I want that understood. I went back down the next night with the plate, and the night after, and he never asked me why I had left in the middle of his question, and I never answered it, and the skulls stayed on their shelf, by size, and after a week I stopped seeing them, the way Touran had stopped seeing the bucket.

That is the thing nobody tells you about a house like that. It does not make you do anything. It just waits until you have stopped seeing.

11

He told me about the door himself. Not the one at the top of the stairs. The other one.

It was perhaps the second week. I had started staying after the plate was finished, sitting on the floor with my back against the shelves because there was only the one chair and he would not take the bed while I was there. He said it was not correct. He had got *correct* from a book — I never found out which — and he used it the way other people use *God*.

I had asked him how. That was all. How he had done it. Twenty-two years in a room the size of my mother's kitchen with a bucket and a candle and a plate a day.

He thought about it for a while. He always did; he never answered anything fast.

"You know the door at the bottom of the stairs," he said. "This one. It has a bolt. On this side. Did you see?"

I had. I had looked at it every night going out. A heavy iron bolt, old, on the inside of the cellar's own door, where a man who wanted to keep people *out* would put it. It had never once been shot.

"The Agha put it there. In the first year. I think he thought that if I could lock myself in, I would feel safer, and if I felt safer I would be quieter. He was not wrong. I was a very quiet child." He turned the book over on his knee. "But I understood, when I was nine or so, that the bolt on the door was not the one that mattered. There was a door inside me as well, and it had no bolt at all, and things were coming through it all the time that I could not have. The sky. I remembered the sky; I was six, I had seen it every day of my life. My mother. Being carried. The feel of grass. Being *looked at* — do you know that feeling? Being in a room with people who can see you?" He said it as if asking about a place I had been. "I could not have any of those things, and they kept coming through the door, and every time they came through I had to spend the rest of the day

getting them back out again, and I was not getting any reading done.

“The book taught me that a man who keeps wanting a thing he cannot have is a man who dies of it. It says so, more or less, on a page I could find for you in the dark. So I made a second door. Inside. And I put a bolt on it, on my side, the same as the one upstairs. And I put the sky behind it, and my mother, and the grass, and being looked at, and being anybody. And I shot the bolt.” He looked at the candle. “It took about a year. It was the hardest thing I have done. Harder than the cat. But I have not had to do it twice. It has stayed shut.”

“You never — want to open it?”

“Wanting is on the other side,” he said. “That is the point of the door.”

I did not say anything for a long time. Then I said the stupidest thing I have ever said in my life.

“I’m sorry.”

He looked, for a moment, almost puzzled. “Why?”

“Because — “ I did not know how to say it to him. “Because of what they did. Because you’re here. Because it isn’t fair.”

“Fair,” he said. He said it the way he had said *Rasht*. “There is a line in the book. The man says it at the very end, when he has done everything he came to do. He says that there is no such thing as a happy man or a wretched one; there is only one state set beside another, and the setting beside is all there is. You would have to show me the other thing, for fair. The thing this is being compared to. I have only ever had this.” He opened the book again. “There were three of us on that roof. One is dead. One is upstairs with a glass he does not drink from, and I hear him some nights, through the pipe, when it is not Thursday and nobody has knocked, just walking, up and down, up and down. And one is here, with a plate every day and four hundred books and nobody to lie to.” He found his place. “I was kept. The little one was thrown away. I have thought about it a great deal, and I do not think I am the one you should be sorry for.”

He meant it. That was the thing I lay awake with afterwards, up in my bed down the corridor from the study. He meant every word of it, and he was wrong, and I could not have told you where.

12

He told me about Touran's finger himself too. I had not asked. I had stopped asking him things by then; he gave them to you anyway, when he judged it was time, the way he gave you the skulls.

"She has told you it was a drawer," he said.

"Yes."

"It was me. I was nineteen. She was moving the shelf — that one, by the bed — because she thought the damp was getting at it, and I had not asked her to, and I took her wrist to stop her and I did not know how hard." He said it without any change in his voice. "I heard it go. She did not cry out. She went upstairs and I did not see her for two days and a niece of Touran's left the plate at the top of the stairs, as she had once before, and did not come down. When she came back the finger was strapped and she did not mention it and neither did I."

"You didn't say sorry."

"I did not have anything to say it with." He looked at me — at my hands, as always. "I understand that there is a thing people have. I have read about it. It is in all the books, people are forever doing it, falling on their knees. I think it is made of being looked at. You do a thing in front of someone and you see their face change and the thing that happens in you then, that is the material. I was last looked at when I was six." He turned back to the candle. "I bit her, also. When I was nine. The first year of the knocking. She reached for the manual, the Scout book, to see what I was doing with it, and I thought she would take it, and I bit her hand to the bone. I am telling you so that you know. She has a mark. She will tell you it was a dog."

I sat with my back against the shelves and I thought about the woman upstairs with her two bad knees and her crooked finger and her radio and her plate, every night for twenty-two years, for a boy

who had bitten her to the bone and broken her finger and did not have anything to be sorry with.

And then the stairs creaked.

He was up before I heard it — or I was; I remember a knuckle on the iron of the pipe that came down the wall beside the vent, and I do not remember anyone crossing the room — and the knuckle knocked. Three times. Not the eleven o'clock four. Softer, and quicker, and without the two after.

Touran's voice came down from the dark at the top. "Jigar? I heard you. Is she still there?"

Jigar [jee-GAR]. It means liver, and it is what you call a child you would give your own for. She had called him that since the night he went down, she told me later, because at six he had been too small for his name.

"She is here," he called up. "Mind the fourth step. It is damp tonight."

Her feet came down, one step, both feet, the next step, both feet, a hand on the wall.

"He does that," she said to me, at the bottom, a little out of breath. "Since my knees went. So I don't have to call down and wake the house. Three knocks when he hears me on the stairs and I know he's heard and I can take my time." She set a folded blanket on the end of the bed. "The nights are cold. You'll catch your death down here, girl, sitting on stone."

He had already gone back to his chair and his book. He did not look up. "Thank you, Touran."

"Eat your orange," she said, and went back up, one step at a time, and he waited until the top step had creaked and the door had settled before he turned a page.

Both things were true. I keep saying that. I do not know any other way to say it.

13

"The knocking," I said. "At eleven."

It was perhaps the third week. I had earned it, I thought. I had sat on his floor for twenty nights and not been sick again.

“Yes.”

“Four and two. Every night.”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

He got up and took a book down from the shelf by the bed — not from the rows; from a place of its own, lying flat on top, where a hand could find it in the dark. It was small and soft-backed and falling apart, the cover gone, the pages the colour of tea. He opened it to a place it opened to by itself and held it out to me across the candle.

A table. Two columns. Letters down one side and, beside each letter, a little row of dots and dashes.

A · — N — ·

B — · · · O — — —

C — · — · S · · ·

“When I was nine I heard the pipe knock,” he said, “and I thought: that is a wall, and there is someone on the other side of it. I needed a way to speak through it, and this came down the stairs the same month.” He opened it. “It is called Morse. A man called Morse made it, for the telegraph, which is a wire that carries clicks. Every letter is a pattern of short and long. A short is a dot, a long is a dash. You can send it with anything — a light, a wire, a finger on a pipe. The book is for boys. Scouts. It came down with a box of other things when I was nine. I think it was Babak’s; it has a name scratched out inside the cover.”

I looked at the table. I looked at the row of symbols against the letters and I thought of the four and the two, every night, one second between.

“Four short,” he said, “is H. A short and a long is A. *H. A.*” He took the book back. “*Ha.* Yes — the way you say it to someone in the next room when you cannot be bothered with *baleh* [BAH-leh], the polite one. That is all it is. At eleven I knock *yes* on the pipe, and the house

knocks *yes* back, and we both know that the other is still here, and we go to sleep."

"The house."

"The house."

"Who answers you?"

He put the book back in its place on top of the shelf, exactly where it had been, and sat down.

"The house," he said again, pleasantly, and opened his novel. And I understood that he was lying to me, and that he knew I knew, and that he was letting me not believe him for as long as I wanted — the way you let a child go on thinking the moon follows the car.

Goodnight, I had said back, in my head, every night for a month. Not goodnight. *Yes.* I had been saying yes.

14

I am going to tell this part plainly because there is no other honest way to tell it, and because people will want to make it into something it was not — a love story, or a horror story — and it was neither. It was a thing that happened between a woman who had never been looked at properly and a man who had never seen a body, in a room under a house, and I do not fully understand it, and I am the one it happened to.

It began with my wrist. I should say that it was a Thursday, and that the smoke was in the room, and the setar had been going through the pipe for an hour, and the tea was in me; I say it not as an excuse but because it is true, and because afterwards I could never decide how much of what I felt was mine.

I had stayed late. The candle was low. I was on the floor with my back against the shelves and I had said something — I do not remember what — and he had got up from the chair and come across the room and crouched in front of me and taken my wrist in his hand, the way you take a cup, and put two fingers on the inside of it, where the pulse is.

"May I," he said. After, not before.

I did not pull away. I should say that I was afraid, and I was, but not of him; I was afraid of the thing I could feel myself about to allow.

“Touran’s is slow,” he said. He was not looking at my face. He was looking at his fingers on my wrist with his whole attention, the way he looked at the plate. “Sixty, sixty-two. It has been slow for years. Yours is a hundred and four.” He counted silently. I saw his lips move. “A hundred and six now. Why?”

“You know why.”

“I do not,” he said. “That is why I am asking.”

Here is what I will say about the weeks that followed, and then I will stop.

He had never seen another body. Not since he was six, and a six-year-old does not see bodies, he sees people. He approached mine the way I had watched him approach the pigeon — in the telling, I mean; I was not there for the pigeon — with complete attention and no shame and no tenderness. Not cruelty. Tenderness is a thing you learn from being handled gently, and he had last been handled gently at six, and what was left in him in place of it was *interest*. He asked questions. During. What was this for. Why did I do that with my breath. Whether this was the same for everyone or only for me. He noted sounds. He said, once, *that is the sound Babak’s wife made, through the ceiling, the year before she died — I always wondered what it was*, and I nearly left and did not.

He did not know that he was supposed to stop doing what he was doing when I came down the stairs. The first time, I stood at the bottom step with the plate and he was on the bed and he finished — not hurriedly, not slowly, the way you finish a sentence — and sat up and said, “You are early again,” and I understood that nobody had ever told him this was a thing done privately because there had never been a private and a public in this room, only the room.

And I kept going down.

I have asked myself why for a long time. I will give you the answers I have, and none of them is the whole one. Because the money was good and he was part of the money. Because I was twenty-two and nobody in my life had ever paid me the kind of attention he paid a pulse. Because it was the most alive I had ever felt in my body and I

had not known until then that I had not been feeling alive. Because I pitied him. Because I did not pity him at all, and that was a relief, after the pity. Because he was beautiful, in the way a thing is beautiful that has been made by only one force for a very long time, like a stone in a river.

Because he never once looked at my face, and I had been waiting all my life for somebody to stop looking at my face.

All of those. None of them. I went down, and I did not know what I had let touch me, and I knew exactly what I had let touch me, and I went down again.

15

I have to stop the story here and tell you about the smoke, because everything I did after this I did inside it, and if I do not tell you what it was like you will think I was a different kind of person than I am. I was not drunk. I was not dreaming. I was something I did not have a word for then and have only a poor one for now, and I will go slowly, because it went slowly.

It was the first Thursday I stayed in the laundry instead of going down. A quarter to eleven. The tea was in me — Touran's black tea with the sugar and the seeds in the bottom, which I had drunk every night for weeks now without thinking, the way you take what a mother hands you. I sat on the concrete between the two machines with Yasmin's exercise book on my knee and the pencil in my hand and my back against the warm enamel, and I waited for the knocking, and before the knocking came the other things.

The smoke came first. Touran had gone past the door with the brass dish, slowly, one foot and then the other on the concrete of the corridor, and the esfand was crackling on the coals, and I heard her set it down at the head of the stairs and come back without it. Smoke in a corridor does not rise. It finds the floor and moves along it like water looking for the lowest place. It came under the laundry door in a flat grey sheet and spread across the concrete and reached me and climbed me, and the smell of it was the smell of every Thursday of my childhood, my mother waving the dish around my father's head before his night shift at the brick kilns, saying the words, *let the eye of the envious burst* — and I breathed it, and

went on breathing it, and did not open the door, because it had never occurred to anyone in my life that the smoke was anything but a blessing.

Then the setar. From above, down the iron pipe that came out of the ceiling beside me and went down into the floor. Four strings and the nail of one finger, so quiet that if the machines had been running I would not have heard it. A few notes. A pause. The same few notes again, with one of them changed. A pause. I put my hand flat on the pipe to feel it, and the pipe was warm, which it had never been, and the notes came up into my palm as well as into my ears.

And then the room began to change, and I am going to tell you exactly how, because the how is the only part of it I am sure of.

The hum of the machines — they were not running, but a house hums; a refrigerator, a transformer somewhere, the city itself — stopped being a hum and became a note. One note, low, steady, under everything, the way the ground is under everything. And the setar was playing on top of that note, and had been all along, and I had not been able to hear it before. The corridor outside the door got longer. I could not see it; I knew it. The laundry got taller. The pipe under my hand was not iron any more, or it was iron and also a thing that went down through the floor and up through the ceiling and did not stop at either, and I was holding on to it the way you hold the rail on a bus that is going somewhere you have not been.

When the setar stopped, the line of it went on. That is the thing I most want you to understand. The man upstairs lifted his nail from the string and the sound went on inside me, the same few notes, turning over, as if the music had been in me all along and he had only been playing what was already there. And in the dark behind my eyes — my eyes were open; I could see the machine, the sink, the door; but behind them, in the place you see with your eyes shut — there was a pattern, small, repeating, like the holes in the lid of the brass dish, like the squares of the exercise book, like the stones in the rim of the fountain I had counted twice. I was not frightened. I was clear. That is the only word I have. Clear, and far from myself, and listening with my whole skin.

And in that clearness I understood something about the house, and then about the street, and then about myself, and I will put it as

plainly as I can, because I have had a long time to find the words and these are the best ones.

Everyone I had ever met had been made. By a mother, a street, a school, a language, a God, a country. You could see the making on them like a tailor's chalk. The old man had been made by money and by the year he was born. Touran had been made by a village and thirty years of somebody else's kitchen. Babak had been made by this house. I had been made by Khazaneh and by counting. Yasmin was being made in front of me, day by day, with every *sorry* she was taught to say. That was what a person was, I had always thought: the thing the making made.

But under the making there was something else. I felt it that night the way you feel a current under a boat — not see it, feel it, in the way the boat moves against what your hands are doing. There was a part of every one of us that nobody had made. It had been there before the mother and the street and the God, and it did not speak their language, and it did not care what they wanted, and it had never once in its life been allowed to say anything out loud. It was the part that priced things. It was the part that knew who was kept and who was thrown away before anyone had decided. It was the part of my mother that had looked at my father, some nights, with a look that had nothing to do with love, and the part of the old man that had made his decision on the stones with his hand on his dead son's chest before his grief had even arrived. It was the same part in all of them. In the rich house and the poor one. In the woman on the bench in the park who said *the owners never ask* and the owner who did not ask. It was not the part of us that was bad. It was the part of us that was *there*, under everything, like the note under the setar, like the ground under the house, and all the making in the world was only a floor laid over it so that we could walk around on top of it and not look down.

And I understood that the house had a floor like that too. And that the whole house — the old man, Touran, Babak, the little girl, the street — had agreed not to look at what was under it, the way you agree not to look at the thing under yourself. And that I had been looking at it for a month, every night, with a plate in my hands.

I did not think *he is that.* I want to be exact. I was not thinking in those words. I was feeling, with my whole clear skin, that the thing under the floor of the house and the thing under the floor of me were one thing, and that the smoke had not put it there. The smoke had only turned the lights on in the room where it had always been.

That is what I have to tell you about the esfand, and the setar, and the Thursdays. People will want it to be a drug, and it was, in the way that water is a drug to someone who has never seen their own face. It did not give me anything. It took away the floor for an hour, and let me look down, and what I saw was not a stranger. My mother would have said the eye was off me. I think the eye was finally on.

The knocking began inside that. Four, and two. *Ha.* And then the long runs. And I picked up the pencil, and I began.

16

The exercise book was Yasmin's. A school one, squared paper, a cartoon dog on the cover. She had three and never used the third. I took it.

That first Thursday on the laundry floor, inside the clearness, I heard the whole hour and wrote almost none of it.

Four and two. *Ha.* And then, a minute later, from above, from the end of the corridor on my own floor — four and two. *Ha.*

And then the long knocking began.

I had thought I would write down dots and dashes. I could not. It was too fast. It came in runs — knock knock knock, pause, knock, long pause, knock-knock — and by the time I had decided whether a knock was short or long the next three had gone past. I filled a page with marks that meant nothing. I tore it out. I started again, and this time I did not try to tell short from long; I just made a mark for every knock and a space for every pause, and let the shape of it go onto the paper however it fell.

It went on for fifty minutes. Then it stopped — a pause longer than the others — and from above came a short run, and from below a shorter one, and then nothing, and the house settled, and I sat between the machines with six pages of pencil marks and my hand

cramped shut, and the smoke gone thin, and the note the machines had been playing gone back to being a hum, and I was sick in the laundry sink, quietly, the way you are after esfand tea, and rinsed it, and went up.

The next Thursday I did it again. And the one after.

I am not clever. I want to say that. I am not one of those girls in the films who looks at a page of marks and sees the pattern. I am a girl who counts. So I counted. I counted which runs came most often. I counted how long the pauses were between runs and found that there were two kinds, a short kind and a longer kind, and I guessed — I did not know, I guessed — that the short kind was between letters and the longer kind was between words. And I took the Scout book down from its place on the top of the shelf one afternoon when he was asleep, because he slept in the afternoons with the vent at its greyest, and I copied the table into the back of the exercise book, and I put the Scout book back to a finger's width, and I knew he would know anyway, and I did it.

And then I sat in the laundry, in the daytime, with the washing going, and I went through three Thursdays of marks with the table, one letter at a time.

Most of it was nothing. I had got the shorts and longs wrong, or missed knocks, or the pauses had fooled me. But some runs came again and again, the same shape, and the shape of one of them was seven letters long, and when I had worked it through the table — twice, three times, with my finger on the paper and my lips moving like Touran reading my references — it said:

B A R A D A R

Brother.

I sat on the laundry floor with the machine going round beside me and the exercise book open on my knees for a long time. I did not cry. I do not know what I did. I think I just sat there and let it be true, the way he had let it be true on the steps when he was six.

17

After the first word it went faster. That is how it is with anything — the first word costs you everything and the second one is nearly free.

I got better at hearing the shorts from the longs. I got better at the pauses. I began to take down whole runs cleanly and to work them through the table the next morning at the kitchen table with the exercise book open inside Touran's big cookbook, so that anyone coming in would see a girl studying a recipe. Touran saw. Touran, who could not read Morse and could not have told you what a telegraph was, looked at the cookbook and at my face and went on with the onions.

The second word was a name.

Y A S M I N

I got it on a Tuesday morning from the marks of the Thursday before, and I had to put the pencil down. The letters had thrown me. The table in the manual was the foreign alphabet — the Scouts used the international one, the same as the English — and the brothers spelled Persian in it the way everyone spells Persian on a telephone, by the sound. I had learned those letters for two years at school and read them the way you read a shop sign. Y A S M I N meant nothing to me on the page until I said it out loud and heard it.

He was talking about her. Under the floor, to the house, every Thursday, about the little girl I put to bed.

The third word was H A N O O Z. *Hanooz* [hah-NOOZ]. *Still.* I got that one and a few around it — *INJA*, here; *KHOOB*, well; *NA*, no — and a run that I worked and reworked and that would not come out as anything, and that I understood later was his laugh, if that is what you call it on a pipe: a run of shorts with no pattern, just a sound a man makes.

And then one night in the laundry, taking down the marks, I understood something that I should have understood weeks before, that a girl who counts should have had on the first night.

The sound from below came up through the concrete between the machines. I had always known that. The sound from *above* — the answer — did not come from across the corridor, or from the kitchen, or from anywhere in the back. It came down. Down the same pipe. From directly overhead. I put my hand flat on the iron where it went up into the ceiling and I felt it, under my palm, the faint knock of an answer, coming down from the room above the laundry.

The study. The end of the corridor on my own floor. Babak's study, where he shut himself in on Thursdays with a glass he did not drink from.

It was not the house. It had never been the house. For twenty years, every Thursday, for an hour, the man under the floor had been talking to the man above it — to his brother, who had said *Zal pushed him* on the steps when he was eight and had been answering the pipe since he was eleven — and the whole street had heard them and called it the house, and the little girl between them said goodnight to it in her head.

I took down the last run of that Thursday with my hand shaking so that I was not sure of it. I worked it the next morning in the cookbook. It was from below. It was the first whole sentence I ever got clean, start to finish, and it was a question, and it was not for me.

E M R O O Z C H I K E S H I D ?

Emrooz chi keshid [em-ROOZ chee keh-SHEED].

What did she draw today?

TAP CODE — II

The ones who were kept

Another note before the story goes on. You have met him now. You have seen the shelf and the bucket and the door he says he built inside himself. You will want to know if a person can really become that. Here is what is known.

Nobody has ever done to a child exactly what was done to the boy in this book, and then written it down. But people have come close, by accident and on purpose, and doctors and scientists have studied what came out. The boy is made from what they found. Here it is, in order, in plain words.

Language has a door, and the door closes. In 1970 a girl of thirteen was found in a house in Los Angeles. She had been kept in a back room since she was a baby, tied to a chair by day and shut in a crib at night, and nobody had spoken to her. The doctors called her Genie to protect her name. She learned words quickly once she was out — hundreds of them. She never learned to put them in order. She could say *want milk*; she could never say *I would like some milk, please,* and no amount of teaching got her there. The scientists who worked with her concluded that there is a window in a child's early years when the brain is built to take in grammar, and that if nothing comes in through the window, it shuts.

A hundred and fifty years before, in 1828, a boy of about sixteen walked into the city of Nuremberg in Germany holding a letter. He could say a few sentences and write one name — Kaspar Hauser. He said he had been kept in a dark cell all his life, fed bread and water, and had never seen a human face. He learned to speak afterwards, and to write, and he spoke strangely for the rest of his short life, like a man translating from a language only he knew.

The boy in this book went into the cellar at six. He had six years of sunlight and talk in him already; the window was open and things had come through. And he was spoken to every day — one voice, a cook's, and the radio through the wall, and a brother on Thursdays, and books. So his language did not close. It grew, but it grew crooked, fed on one woman's kitchen Persian and one novel from another century, read two hundred times. That is why he sounds the way he sounds. He is not slow. He is a man who learned to talk from

one old novel and a radio through a wall. Which novel, he has not said.

Faces need practice. In the 1990s, after the fall of the dictatorship in Romania, the world found out about the state orphanages. Tens of thousands of children had been kept in rows of cots, fed and changed on a schedule, and otherwise left. They were not beaten. They were not spoken to, or held, or looked at. A team of American scientists began following some of them in the year 2000 and has followed them ever since, and what they found was this: a child who is not looked at does not learn to look. Those children grew up unable to read a face — to tell a frown from a smile, or to care which was which. Some could not attach to anyone. Some attached to everyone, instantly, with no difference between a mother and a stranger in a shop.

The boy in this book has seen one face in twenty-two years, and that one by candle. He cannot read yours. He reads the thing he has had instead: sound. Breath, footstep, the weight on a stair, the pitch of a voice through iron. He knows you are lying by how you set down a plate.

The body remembers the open and fears it. People who have spent years in a cell alone — in the isolation units of American prisons, which a doctor named Stuart Grassian began studying in the 1980s, and which have since been studied by many others — come out and find that the world attacks them. Light hurts. Noise hurts. A room with more than two people in it is unbearable. An open sky makes the legs go. Men held as hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s, some of them for more than six years, chained in small rooms, wrote afterwards about their first hour outside: not joy — panic, in the body, that the mind could not talk down.

That is why the sky in this book is written the way it is.

And here is the thing the book turns on. Most people in long isolation come apart. The studies agree. They stop sleeping at proper hours, stop washing, talk to themselves, see things, rage, go flat. The walls come inside.

But a few do the opposite. A few build. A navy commander held alone in Hanoi for years kept himself whole with routine and

memory and a code of rules he set for himself and would not break. A man in the state of Maine walked into the woods in 1986 and lived alone there for twenty-seven years, stealing food from cabins, speaking to no one — not one word, by his own count, in all that time except a single *hi* to a hiker — and when he was caught in 2013 he was lucid, strange, and in some ways clearer than the people who questioned him. And in a cellar in Austria, a woman kept underground by her father for twenty-four years raised three children who never saw daylight until 2008, and she had taught them to read and write down there, by lamplight, with nothing but what was handed down the stairs.

What those people had in common, as far as anyone can tell, was three things. Something to read or remember. One voice, however rarely. And a rule — something they had decided about themselves, early, and held to.

The boy in this book had four hundred books, a cook, a brother on Thursdays, and a rule. The rule was the cook's: *you are kept, so behave like something worth keeping.* He built a life on that sentence. It is not the life you or I would have built. But it stood for twenty-two years, which is longer than most houses.

One more thing, about what the room was full of. Every Thursday night for twenty-two years a fistful of esfand was burned on coals at the head of those stairs, for the eye, and the smoke went down, as smoke in a stairwell does, into a closed room with one small vent. Esfand is wild rue — *Peganum harmala* [PEG-ah-num har-MAH-lah] in the books — and its seeds hold two substances, harmine [HAR-meen] and harmaline [HAR-mah-leen], that are the same ones in the vine the peoples of the Amazon brew into ayahuasca [eye-ah-WAH-skah] to see the dead. A pinch on the coals is a blessing. A room full of it, night after night for twenty years, with the seeds in the evening tea besides, is something else: a slow, dreaming wakefulness, voices that answer, pictures behind the eyes, and a clarity that feels like truth. Persian doctors wrote about it a thousand years ago. It is in every kitchen in the country and nobody asks. The boy in this book breathed it for twenty-two years.

He calls the thing he built the second door. The scientists would have another name for it. He would not care what it was. He would ask you whether it worked, and you would have to say that it did.

III. THURSDAYS

18

I kept the exercise book inside the cookbook and the cookbook on the kitchen table and I worked at it in the mornings with the radio on, and Touran cut onions, and nobody asked.

Every Thursday was the same now. The tea at a quarter to eleven, with the seeds in the bottom. The laundry floor. Touran going past the door with the brass dish and the smoke coming back along the concrete to find me. The setar from above, down the iron, a few notes, stopping, starting, until the room went long and the hum became a note and I was clear. Then the knocks, inside that. I was not frightened of it any more. I waited for it the way you wait for a friend.

The Thursdays came out in pieces. Not sentences — pieces. Words with gaps around them where I had missed a run or got a long for a short. Like hearing two people through a wall when the television is on.

↑ TOURAN KNEES WORSE
↓ I KNOW. I HEAR THE STAIRS
↓ THE ARGHAVAN
↑ NOT YET

That one came back the next week, and the week after. Every Thursday in March, from below, the same word, and every Thursday the same answer, until one Thursday the answer was different.

↑ TODAY IT STARTED
↓ WHAT COLOUR
↑ LIKE ALWAYS
↓ TELL ME
↑ PURPLE

↓ IT’S NOT PURPLE

↑ IT IS PURPLE

↓ TOURAN SAYS IT’S BLUE WITH SOMETHING IN IT

↑ TOURAN DOESN’T LOOK

↓ NEITHER DO I

I sat at the kitchen table with that one for a long time. He had asked about the arghavan every spring since he was twelve, I found out later. Sixteen springs. He had never seen one. He had a theory about the colour built out of Touran's descriptions and he did not want it corrected, and his brother, who walked under the tree every morning to his dark-blue car, had been telling him for sixteen years that it was purple and losing.

Babak passed me in the upstairs hall that afternoon on his way to the study. He nodded. He nodded the way you nod at the nanny: a small tip of the head that means *I know you exist and that is all I am required to know.* He had a tired, handsome, unfinished face, like a drawing somebody had left. He did not look at the cookbook under my arm. He had no reason to.

I thought: *you were eleven.* I thought: *you have done this every Thursday of your life since you were eleven years old, and you walk past me in the hall and nod.* And I nodded back.

19

The first full Thursday I got clean, start to finish, was about Yasmin. Most of them were, I would learn. She was what they talked about. She was the thing they had.

↑ SHE ASKED ABOUT GOD
↓ WHAT DID SHE ASK
↑ IF GOD SEES EVERYTHING
↓ WHAT DID YOU SAY
↑ YES
↓ WRONG
↑ WHY

↓ BECAUSE NOW SHE'LL THINK HE WATCHES HER IN THE BATHROOM. TELL HER GOD SEES WHAT MATTERS AND LEAVES THE REST ALONE

↑ THAT'S NOT WHAT THE MULLAH ON THE TELEVISION SAYS

↓ THE MULLAH ON THE TELEVISION DOESN'T SLEEP IN THE ROOM NEXT TO HERS

And later, the same night:

↑ SHE DREW THE HOUSE WITH A FACE. TOURAN MADE HER SAY SORRY FOR USING THE GOOD PAPER

↓ NO

↑ SHE ALREADY DID

↓ THEN TELL HER TOMORROW THE DRAWING WAS GOOD AND THE PAPER WAS FOR THAT. DON'T TEACH HER TO SAY SORRY FOR MAKING THINGS. SHE'LL LEARN TO SAY SORRY FOR THE OTHER KIND SOON ENOUGH

↑ WHY THE OTHER KIND

↓ EVERYONE LEARNS

I put the pencil down.

The next morning Babak came into Yasmin's room before he left for the office, which he never did, and crouched down by her bed in his suit, and said, "That drawing of the house. The one with the face. That was a good drawing. That's what the paper's for." And Yasmin looked at him with her mouth open, because he had never said anything like that to her in her life, and he kissed the top of her head and went out to the car, and she said to me, "Baba liked my drawing," in the voice of a child who has seen a dog talk.

He had never said anything like that to her because he had never thought of it. The man under the floor had thought of it.

I stood in the doorway and understood what I was looking at. For six years — since she was born, since before her mother died — the little girl I was paid to raise had been raised by a man who had never heard her voice, through a pipe, one night a week, by instructions. What to say about God. What to do about the drawing. He knew her better than her father did. He was better at it than anyone in the house, better than me, and he had built her out of what Babak reported and what he could hear through the ceiling, the way he had built the arghavan out of what Touran said. And he was right about her. That was the thing. He was *right.*

20

I should tell you that he was funny. People will not want to hear it, after the shelf, after the bucket. But he was, and if I leave it out you will not understand why I kept going down, or why Babak kept answering for twenty years, or why Touran took the envelope.

↓ THE AGHA HAS STARTED A DIET

↑ HOW DO YOU KNOW

↓ I HEAR THE REFRIGERATOR OPEN AT THREE IN THE MORNING AND CLOSE WITHOUT ANYTHING BEING TAKEN. IT IS THE SOUND OF A MAN LOOKING AT A SHOLEH ZARD

↑ TOURAN MADE SHOLEH ZARD

↓ TOURAN ALWAYS MAKES SHOLEH ZARD WHEN HE STARTS A DIET. IT IS HER WAY OF HAVING AN OPINION

I laughed out loud in the laundry. Alone, on the floor between the machines at eleven at night, with the exercise book on my knee. I clapped my hand over my mouth and then I laughed into my hand.

And another night, in March, the week before the new year, from below:

↓ ASK TOURAN WHICH PHOTO THEY'RE PUTTING UP THIS YEAR

↑ THE USUAL ONE

↓ THE USUAL ONE IS BAD. MY EYES ARE SHUT. THERE'S ONE FROM THE LITTLE ONE'S FIRST BIRTHDAY WHERE I LOOK BETTER

↑ I'M NOT GOING TO ASK BABA TO CHANGE THE PHOTO ON YOUR CLOTH

↓ THEN AT LEAST HAVE THEM BRING ME THIS YEAR'S HALVA AND NOT LAST YEAR'S

↑ TOURAN BRINGS YOU THE HALVA EVERY YEAR

↓ TOURAN BRINGS ME THE HALVA. I DIDN'T SAY WHICH YEAR

Sholeh zard [sho-LEH ZARD] is the yellow saffron rice pudding that is made in a great pot and given out in a dead person's name; Touran made it whenever the old man started a diet, which was her way of having an opinion.

I had to ask Touran about that one. Not in words. I just looked at her the next morning and she knew what I was asking, and she said, without turning round from the stove: “Every year, the last Thursday before Nowruz [now-ROOZ] — the new year, you know when; the Thursday everyone goes to the graves. I make the halva [hal-VAH]. Halva for the dead, the dark one, flour and oil and sugar and rosewater, stirred for an hour — you know it; your mother makes it. The khanom used to set it out on a cloth in the upstairs hall with the photographs and the candles and the Quran, for the little one and for him, and send me to the cemetery with the rest to give out. Now I do it. And when the night is over and what is left is going hard, I bring him down a plate. It is a waste otherwise.” She turned the gas down. “He thinks it is the funniest thing in the world. Eating the halva made for his own soul. He asks me every year if it was a good year for the halva.”

“And is it?”

“It’s halva,” said Touran.

I liked him. I need you to know that before the next part. Not in spite of everything. In the middle of it. On the floor of the laundry at eleven at night with my hand over my mouth, I liked him completely, and I had not yet decided anything, and the floor had not yet gone.

21

The night the floor went was not a Thursday. There was no smoke, no tea, no setar. I want that understood: I was as clear as I have ever been in my life, in the ordinary way, and the pipe knocked.

It was a Monday, late in September, and I was awake for no reason at two in the morning, and the pipe knocked.

Not four and two. Not the long Thursday runs. One word. Slowly, the way you would knock it if you were not in a hurry, if there were nobody at the other end to be in a hurry for. And then the same word again. And again. I counted eleven times before it stopped. I did not have the exercise book; I was in bed. I took it down on the inside of my wrist with a fingernail, pressing, and lay in the dark feeling the marks.

In the morning I worked it in the cookbook. It was a name. A woman's name, old-fashioned, the kind you would give a girl in the sixties if you had money.

I asked Touran. I did not want to. I had to.

She stopped cutting. She stood with the knife in her hand and looked at the wall above the stove for a moment, and then she said the name back to me, quietly, and said, "The khanom. His mother." And went back to the onions.

He had not been knocking to Babak. Babak was asleep; I had heard nothing from above. He had been knocking his mother's name on an iron pipe at two in the morning, slowly, eleven times, to nobody — to a woman who had been dead since 2008, who had sat at lunch with people the day he went under the floor, and had never once come down the stairs.

I never asked him about it. I have never told anyone until now. I put the exercise book in the cookbook and I went and got Yasmin up for school.

I only say it so you know that the second door was not perfectly shut. Nothing is. There was a gap under it, like the gap under the cellar door where the rats came in, and some nights, when nobody was knocking, something got through.

22

There was a word I could not place. I had it from three different Thursdays, always from above, always early in the hour, always in the same shape: eight letters. I had the first six clean and the last two kept going wrong.

H O L D A D — —

I worked it for a week. I tried every ending the table gave me and got nothing that was a word. And then on a Wednesday morning, with the radio playing a song about a man whose horse had died, I got the seventh letter right, and the eighth fell in behind it, and I had it.

H O L D A D A M
I pushed.

I went back through the pages. Now that I knew the shape of it I found it everywhere. Not every week. But often. Always from above. Always alone, or nearly alone, in a short run with long pauses around it, the way you say a thing you have said so many times it has worn smooth.

↑ HOL DADAM

And once, the whole of it, which I think he had not knocked in full for a long time, because the pauses were wrong, as if his hand had forgotten the rhythm:

↑ I PUSHED HIM. I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD. I PUSHED HIM

I sat at the kitchen table with the cookbook open and the radio on and Touran cutting onions three feet away, and I read it four times, and then I shut the cookbook and put both hands flat on the cover.

Babak. Not Zal. Babak, aged eight, on the roof with the arghavan out. Babak, who had come down the stairs white as a plate and said *Zal pushed him*, and his brother had stood there and let it be true. Babak, who had gone to school and university and married and buried a wife and had a daughter and a dark blue car, and who, every Thursday for twenty years, had sat in a locked room over the laundry and knocked *I pushed him* on a pipe to the brother who was doing his time.

I thought I understood the house, then. I did not. I understood a corner of it.

23

The answer came the next week. I had been waiting for it. I had not known I was waiting for it until I was on the laundry floor with the pencil and heard the pipe below start to speak and felt my whole body go still.

↑ I PUSHED HIM

↓ I KNOW

↑ I KNOW YOU KNOW

↓ I'VE KNOWN SINCE THE THIRD YEAR. YOU TOLD ME WHEN I WAS ELEVEN. I HAVE NEVER TOLD ANYONE. I NEVER WILL

↑ WHY

↓ BECAUSE IT WAS ALREADY DONE

I read that last line in the kitchen in the morning and I did not understand it, and then I did. He had been eleven. He had been under the floor for five years already. His father had buried him in Behesht-e Zahra and the newspapers had drowned him and the house upstairs had closed over the place where he had been like water. And his brother had knocked the truth down the pipe to him, and he had looked at it — I could see him look at it, the way he looked at the plate, with his whole attention — and he had understood that it changed nothing. Nobody was going to come down the stairs and let him out because of it. It was already done. So he put it behind the second door with the sky and his mother, and shot the bolt, and went back to his book.

He had carried the lie for the family for seventeen years knowing it was a lie. Not for them. I want to be exact. Not for his father, who had put him there, or for Babak, who had said the words. He carried it the way he kept the room swept: because it was there, and it was his, and he was the kind of thing that keeps.

I went down that night. I had not meant to say anything. I said it anyway, standing by the table with the plate still covered.

“The little one. Your brother. Do you — “ I did not know how to ask it. “Do you think about him?”

He looked at the plate. “He was four,” he said. “I was six. He was a noise in the next room. He was a noise in the next room and then the noise stopped.” He lifted the cover and the smell came up between us. “I have heard the Agha weep for him, through the ceiling. Many times. Years. I have heard Babak say what he says. I listen to it the way I listen to the rain in the shaft — with interest. I do not have the thing you are asking about. There is nowhere in me for it to have grown.”

“He was your *brother*.”

“Yes.” He picked up the fork. “Let me ask you. How many dead people have you felt the thing about? The thing you want me to feel?”

“I — my grandfather. A girl from school.”

“Did you meet them?”

“Of course I met them.”

“Then that is the difference,” he said, and began to eat, rice first, “and not anything that is wrong with me.”

24

It took me a month to see the next thing, because I did not want to.

I had been reading the Thursdays as talk. Two brothers, a pipe, an hour a week; what Yasmin drew, how Touran’s knees were, the arghavan, the sholeh zard. I had been reading them the way you read letters between people who love each other — for the warmth, skipping the business.

But there was a pattern under the warmth and once I had seen it I could not stop seeing it. Babak *asked*. Zal *decided*. Every time. Not advised — decided. And Babak did what the pipe said.

↑ BABA WANTS ME TO LEAVE THE COMPANY AND GO TO DUBAI WITH MY UNCLE

↓ NO. IF YOU GO THERE’S NOBODY IN THE HOUSE WHO KNOWS. STAY, TELL HIM YES, AND THEN DON’T GO. HE’LL FORGET. HE FORGETS EVERYTHING BUT THE ONE THING

Babak had not gone to Dubai. He had been in the house every day of my time there.

↑ THERE’S A GIRL. FROM THE OFFICE. I WANT —

↓ WHAT’S SHE LIKE

↑ CHEERFUL. ASKS QUESTIONS

↓ NO. MARRY ONE WHO DOESN’T ASK QUESTIONS. THERE ARE PLENTY. GOOD FAMILIES; THEY LOOK THE OTHER WAY. FIND ONE WHO LOOKS THE OTHER WAY

The date on that one, as near as I could work it from what came around it, was 2018. Babak had married in 2019. A girl from a good family. I had seen her photograph by Yasmin’s bed, laughing, with the baby on her hip.

And then I found the one that stopped me. It was old; Babak referred back to it in the way you refer to a thing both people

remember, and Zal closed it in four words. I had to piece it from two Thursdays.

> ↑ LIKE THE GIRL BEFORE. THE ONE WHO ASKED ABOUT THE PIPE
> ↓ THAT ONE WAS THROWN AWAY. SHE WAS GIVEN A GOOD LETTER. THAT WAS CLEAN

The maid. The girl Ashraf Khanom had told me about on the bench in the park, ten years ago, who had asked Touran and then asked the son and was gone by the next Friday with a very good reference, and was in Rasht now, doing well.

Door andakhteh shod [door an-dakh-TEH shod]. Not *we let her go*; not *she was dismissed*. The word you use for a thing you put in the bin. The word from the other half of his rule. *Kept. Thrown away.* He had said it about a woman the way he had said it about the little one, and Babak had done it — had gone to Touran, or to his father, and had the girl out of the house inside a week with a letter that would get her another job — and the two of them had called it clean, and gone on to talk about the arghavan.

He had not been talking to his brother for twenty years. He had been running him. From under the floor, on a pipe, an hour a week, with nothing but what Babak told him and what he could hear through the ceiling — and Babak had let him, because Babak had said *Zal pushed him* on the stairs when he was eight and had never since been able to decide anything for himself, and here was somebody who would decide.

Door andakhteh shod. I sat at the kitchen table and I thought about the plate on the end of the counter, and the room next to Yasmin's with the lock that worked, and three times the beauty salon.

25

I have thought a great deal about how to tell the next part, and I have decided to tell it in order and not explain myself, because I did not explain myself at the time and it would be a lie to do it now.

I went to Babak.

Not to the police. People will ask that, and the answer is that I am from Khazaneh and I know what happens to a girl from Khazaneh

who walks into a police station in Fereshteh with a school exercise book and a story about a rich family and a man in a cellar. Nothing happens. Or something does, and it happens to her.

I went to Babak. On a Wednesday afternoon, when he was in the study with the door open because it was not Thursday and there was nothing in there to lock. I knocked on the frame. He looked up from a laptop with his tired unfinished face and nodded at the nanny.

I put the exercise book on his desk. Open. At the page that said BARADAR, and under it YASMIN, and under that, in my careful pencil, *EMROOZ CHI KESHID?*

He looked at it for a long time. He did not touch it. Then he looked up at me — at my face; he looked at faces, he was not his brother — and I saw him understand, and I saw something in him that I had not expected and did not want. It was relief.

“Twenty years,” he said. It was the first thing he had ever said to me that was not about Yasmin’s schedule. “Twenty years I’ve been waiting for somebody to put that on this desk.” He closed the laptop. “How much?”

I had a number. I had worked it out at the kitchen table, the way I work everything out. I opened my mouth to say it.

“Wait,” he said. “Before you say it. I want you to read something first.” He stood up and went to the shelf behind the desk — books, like his brother’s, in no order I could see — and took down a stack of school exercise books, the same squared paper as Yasmin’s, the covers soft with handling, and found one from the middle and opened it and turned it toward me on the desk beside mine.

His hand. Nineteen years of Thursdays in pencil, dots and dashes, with the letters worked out underneath in a boy’s handwriting that had become a man’s. He had been doing what I had been doing since he was eleven. Of course he had. How else do you learn a language through a wall?

“There were two manuals,” he said, seeing me look. “Scout books. Baba bought everything in pairs, one for each of us. His went down the stairs in a box of old things. Mine stayed on my shelf. One night

the pipe started knocking in a pattern and I took the book down to see if it was what I thought it was." He almost smiled. "It was."

"This is 2021," he said. "November. Read it. Then tell me the number."

I read it.

↑ SHE FOUND THE NOTEBOOKS. SHE CAN'T READ THEM BUT SHE KNOWS THEY'RE SOMETHING. SHE ASKS ABOUT THE PIPE. SHE ASKS WHY I LOCK MYSELF IN ON THURSDAYS. SHE ASKED TOURAN. TODAY SHE ASKED ME

↓ WHAT DID YOU TELL HER

↑ THAT I WORK

↓ SHE DIDN'T BELIEVE YOU

↑ NO

And then the four words I knew. The same hand, the same pencil, worked out under the dashes.

↓ SHE IS THROWN AWAY OR I AM

Babak turned the page. December. The arghavan, Touran's knees, Yasmin's first word that was not *maman*. The Thursdays went on as if nothing had been said. Then January. He turned to a page with very little on it.

↓ WAS IT DIFFICULT?

And under it, from above, one letter, worked out in pencil in a man's hand.

↑ NO

He closed the exercise book and put it back in the stack and put the stack back on the shelf.

"She died on the Chalus [chah-LOOS] road," he said. "In January. In the fog, on the bend past the Kandovan [kan-doh-VAHN] tunnel where cars go off every winter. She was going to see her mother. Yasmin was two." He sat down behind the desk. His voice was perfectly level. "Now tell me the number."

I have asked myself since what he wanted me to do with that. I think he wanted me to run. I think a part of him had been waiting

twenty years for somebody to read that page and run screaming out of the house and bring the whole thing down on top of him, and that it would have been a relief too, a bigger one.

I did not run. I told him the number.

He did not argue. He did not even blink. He took a chequebook out of the drawer and I said cash and he nodded as if that were sensible and said the first of the month, like the envelope, and I said yes. And I said I wanted the room on the second floor, the closed floor, with the sheets on the furniture, a proper room with a proper window and not the one beside the child's, and he said yes to that too.

"You'll keep decoding," he said. Not a question.

"Yes."

"He'll know."

"I know he'll know."

Babak nodded slowly. "He's never once said that word about me," he said. "In twenty years. *Door andakhteh.* I used to wait for it."

He opened the laptop. Then he closed it again.

"One more thing." He looked at me, at my face, as his brother never did. "The woman in Zafaraniyeh who put you on the street with that reference. She's my father's cousin. The agency sent us four girls. My brother had me ask one question of each of them, through Touran, before the interview. *Does she count things.* You were the one who'd counted the steps from the gate."

I did not say anything. There was nothing in me to say it with.

"He wanted somebody who'd find it," Babak said. "Somebody who'd go down the corridor and open the door and decode the pipe and put it on this desk. He needed the chapter to arrive. He's been waiting ten years for someone to bring it." He opened the laptop again. "The first of the month. You can go."

I went. I went down the stairs and through the kitchen past Touran and out into the garden and stood under the arghavan, which was beginning to drop its leaves, and I shook for a long time, and then I stopped, and went back in and got Yasmin up from her nap.

I had not found the house. I had been placed in it. The lock on my door, the room beside the child, the plate on the counter where I would see it, the door beside the refrigerator left open a hand's width — none of it was luck. I had walked in through the gate in my good shoes counting, and somebody under the floor had counted me first.

He had made me read it so that I would know what I was pricing. I understood that. He had shown me the woman in the photograph by Yasmin's bed, laughing, and the four words, and the one letter, and the fog, and then he had asked for the number — so that when I said it I would be saying it with my eyes open. So that I would be one of them.

I said it anyway. I have never pretended otherwise. I had a mother with a bad roof, and I had seen the bone wall from the outside, and I knew which side of it I wanted to be on.

26

The Thursday after, I decoded a question I had seen the shape of before and never got clean. It was from above, and from the pauses around it, and the way the answer began, I understood that it had been asked many times. For years.

↑ LET ME COME DOWN. YOU GO UP. IT'S TIME

I read it three times before I believed it. It was Babak asking to come *down* — to take the cellar, to take the plate and the bucket and the bolt — and for his brother to go *up* and have the house.

↓ NO

↑ WHY

↓ I'VE TOLD YOU

↑ TELL ME AGAIN

And he did. It took him most of the hour, in short runs with long pauses, the way he talked when he was choosing the words, and it took me two mornings in the cookbook, and I am going to give it to you whole, in order, because it is the centre of everything and I do not want to cut it.

↓ A DEAD MAN IS FORGIVEN. A LIVING MAN HAS TO BE FORGIVEN. IT ISN’T THE SAME

↓ IF I COME UP, BABA HAS TO LOOK AT ME. YOU HAVE TO LOOK AT ME. THE CHILD HAS TO KNOW HER FATHER LIED AND HER GRANDFATHER BURIED A LIVING BOY. THAT CAN’T BE KEPT. ONCE I COME UP, EVERYTHING COMES UP

↓ YOU WOULDN’T SURVIVE BEING FORGIVEN. I KNOW BECAUSE I HEAR YOU WALK

> ↓ AND SHE WOULD LOSE YOU. THAT IS THE MAIN THING. SHE HAS ALREADY LOST ONE

↓ AND WHERE DOES A DEAD MAN GO. TELL ME. I HAVE NO PAPERS. I HAVE NO NAME. I HAVEN’T BEEN UNDER THE SKY SINCE I WAS SIX. TOURAN SAYS IT IS BIG. I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH BIG

↓ DOWN HERE I AM THE ONLY PERSON IN THIS HOUSE WHO DOESN’T LIE. UP THERE I DON’T KNOW WHAT I WOULD BE. I DON’T KNOW IF THE HOUSE STANDS WITHOUT THAT

↑ THAT ISN’T LOVE. THAT’S SOMETHING ELSE

> ↓ I NEVER SAID IT WAS LOVE. I SAID IT WAS WHAT THERE IS
> ↑ THEN WHAT DO WE DO
> ↓ SABR KON VA OMIDVAR BASH

Sabr kon va omidvar bash [SABR kon vah oh-meed-VAR bahsh]. Be patient, and keep hoping. He knocked it the way you say a thing you have said before.

I read it in the cookbook with Touran’s radio playing and I understood, finally, what I had been looking at since the first night I went down the stairs. Not a prisoner. The man under the floor had been holding the house up. All of it. The old man who had agreed not to notice, the brother who walked up and down at night, the child who said goodnight to a pipe. He had decided, at eleven, with the truth in his hand, that the house could not survive the truth, and he had gone back to his book and kept it — kept all of them — for seventeen years. The prisoner had been the keeper.

And the keeper had named two women. One to Rasht. One to the Chalus road.

I had the exercise book. I knew what was in it. I was the third woman in that house who knew about the pipe, and I had just told the man upstairs my price.

27

Babak answered him. The same night, after a long pause, the longest I had recorded — nearly four minutes of nothing, with my pencil stopped and the machines humming. Then from above, slowly, as if each word cost something:

↑ I'VE NEVER COME DOWN EITHER. TWENTY YEARS. THERE'S A DOOR IN THE KITCHEN AND I'VE NEVER OPENED IT

↓ I TOLD YOU. THE FIRST NIGHT. NOT TO COME DOWN

↑ I WAS ELEVEN. I OBEYED BECAUSE I WAS ELEVEN. AFTER THAT IT WASN'T FOR THAT REASON

↑ I TRIED ONCE. AT SIXTEEN. TOURAN FOUND ME ON THE STAIRS. YOU DIDN'T KNOCK FOR A MONTH

↓ I KNOW

↑ IT WAS THE WORST THING YOU'VE EVER DONE TO ME

↓ I KNOW. THAT'S WHY I DID IT

And then, after another long pause, from above, the same word twice, with a full stop knocked between them that I could hear even on the pipe — a single long, held:

↑ COWARD. COWARD

He was spelling it about himself. Twenty years of walking up and down over his brother's head with a door in the kitchen he had never opened, and a word he had never once had said back to him from below, and he knocked it on the pipe at midnight, twice, so that it would at least exist somewhere outside his own skull.

I sat with that in the laundry. I had read January. I knew what else was in him besides a coward. I knew that *tarsoo* [tar-SOO] — coward — was the word he could stand to knock and that there was another word under it that he could not, and that the man below knew it too, and had never once knocked it either, and that this —

this not-knocking — was the closest thing to mercy that passed between them.

Zal did not answer. The hour ran out. Four and two came up from below, late. *Ha.* And after a moment, from above. *Ha.*

28

I moved to the second floor on the first of December, the day the first envelope came.

The room had a window that looked over the garden to the bone wall and the street beyond it, and a bed with a real mattress, and a wardrobe that smelled of a dead woman's cedar. I took the sheets off the furniture myself. Touran did not help me and did not say anything about the move, but when I came down for supper she had laid a place for me at the end of the kitchen table, where she stood to eat, and she said, "Sit," and I sat, and she stood, and we ate.

That night I lay in the big bed on the closed floor and I counted. The study was one floor below me. The cellar was three. The stone of the party wall was at my shoulder. One wall between me and the street. I thought about the girl in Rasht and the woman on the Chalus road and I thought: *the first one was thrown away and the second one is dead, and you have just moved upstairs.*

At eleven the pipe knocked. It came up through three floors now, faint, but I had learned to hear it the way he had learned to hear the stairs. Four. A pause. Two.

I found that I had knocked back. On the iron bedframe, with my knuckle, before I had decided to. Four. Two.

Ha.

I lay there with my hand on the cold iron, and I did not know which of them I had said it to.

29

He knew within the week. I had known he would. Touran had been told nothing — I had told her nothing, Babak had told her nothing — and Touran said enough anyway, the way she said everything, by setting a plate down a little differently. *She's moved up to the khanom's floor. The Agha doesn't know yet. Babak gave her an envelope.* He could hear a man look at a sholeh zard through two floors; he could hear that.

I went down with the plate on the Friday and he was at the table with the candle and he looked at the plate and not at me and said, "Thank you," and ate, rice first, and set the fork parallel to the knife, and pushed the plate an exact distance away, and then he said:

"Tell me about the sky again."

That was all. No reproach. He did not have anything to reproach me with; he had told me himself. I had been waiting all week for *door andakhteh* and it did not come, and I understood, standing there, that it was not going to, and that I did not know why, and that not knowing why was worse.

I told him about the sky. I had done it before, many nights; it was a thing he asked for the way Yasmin asked for the same story. I told him it was not one colour. I told him about the way it went white at the edges in the summer and the way the rain came across the city from the mountains like a curtain being drawn, and the colour it was at six in the evening over Khazaneh, from the roof of my mother's building, which is a colour I do not have a word for and have never seen anywhere else. I told him about clouds, which he had read about and did not believe in. He listened with his eyes closed, putting it away.

"Touran says it is big," he said when I had finished.

"It's big."

"Bigger than this room."

"Yes."

"Bigger than the house."

"The house is in it."

He opened his eyes and looked, for once, somewhere near my face. “I do not know what to do with that,” he said. “I have tried. It will not go behind the door. It is the only thing that will not.”

That Thursday, from the laundry floor, I took down a word I had seen only once before. Babak had let me read the oldest of his exercise books after the day in the study — an eleven-year-old’s pencil, 2007, the first full thing his brother had ever knocked to him: *NAYA PAYIN. MIFAHMAN KE MIDOONI VA MANO MIBARAN JAYI KE NATOONI BEZANI.* Don’t come down. They’ll know you know and they’ll move me where you can’t knock.

Now the word came from below, alone, without the *no*, with the house silent around it.

↓ BIA PAYIN

Bia payin [bee-YAH pah-YEEN]. Come down.

30

It was the longest Thursday in twenty years. I know because Babak told me afterwards, and because I was on the laundry floor for all of it, and my hand would not close for a day.

It began at eleven and did not end until nearly two.

That night the setar went on for the best part of an hour before the first knock. One line, over and over, the same few notes with small changes, the way you say a thing to yourself until it is true. And the smoke was thicker than I had known it, because Touran had thrown two fistfuls on the coals instead of one — she knew; she always knew — and it came under the door in a sheet and filled the laundry to the height of my chest where I sat, and I breathed it, and the tea was in me, and the pipe was warm under my palm, and the note was under everything, and the floor went.

I had been under it before. I have told you. But I want to tell you what was different that night, because it was the last time, and because I understood something then that I had only felt before.

The first time, I had looked down and seen the current under the house and under myself and understood that they were one thing. That night I understood that it had a face. Not his — I mean not a

face I could have drawn. But I understood that the thing under the floor of every person I had ever met was not a feeling and not a thought. It was somebody. It had a voice, and the voice was always calm, and it always spoke in finished sentences, and it never once said *I feel*; it said *I notice*. It had been in the old man on the stones. It had been in my mother at the window. It had been in me at the kitchen table, working out the number. And when a person was alone enough, and quiet enough, and the floor was gone for long enough — twenty-two years in a cellar, say, or an hour on a laundry floor on a Thursday — it would sit up on the bed, and look at you, not at your face, and ask you what colour the car was.

Every culture I had ever heard of had a name for it and a way of keeping it under the floor. Esfand for the eye. A plate for the dead. A knock on a pipe. Prayers; the serials; the park on Friday; the agreement never to ask. All of it was the same work, done by everyone, in every house on the street and every street in the city and I suppose every city there is: the work of keeping the floor laid over the one thing that is the same in all of us and that none of us was taught. It is not a bad thing. I want to say that plainly, because the book I had not yet read would have told me otherwise. It is only the thing that is *there* when the making is taken away, and the making is a kindness, and the floor is a kindness, and I had spent a year in a house that had decided to keep the thing in a room and feed it instead.

The smoke had not made any of this. I knew that then, with the kind of knowing you cannot argue with after. The esfand and the setar were only a ceremony, the way a plate is a ceremony — a way of saying to the floor, *for one hour, you may go*. What was under it had always been under it. The ceremony does not create the current. It only lets you understand that you are standing in it, and have been all your life, and that so is everyone, and that nobody is going to say so out loud.

I sat in it with my back against the machine, so clear I could have read the knocks off the inside of my own skull, and the knocks began, and I will not give you all of it. Most of it was the two of them going back over things they had already said, the way people do when they have decided something and are frightened of it —

the sky, the papers, the child. I will give you the parts that mattered, in the order they came, and let you hear the hour get later in them.

↑ COME DOWN. YOU SAID COME DOWN

↓ YES

↑ WHY NOW. TWENTY YEARS OF NO

↓ BECAUSE IT HAS A PRICE NOW

↑ HER

↓ HER. IT ISN'T HER FAULT. IT'S WHAT PEOPLE DO WITH THINGS THEY FIND. BUT A THING WITH A PRICE ISN'T MINE ANY MORE. I CAN'T KEEP IT. IT KEEPS ITSELF, WITH MONEY, AND THAT'S SOMETHING ELSE. THAT'S WHAT BABA DID

I sat on the concrete between the machines and read my own name in it, without the name.

↑ AND YOU. WHERE TO

↓ TO SEE WHAT IT IS

↑ YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO WALK IN THE STREET. YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO CROSS. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT A TRAFFIC LIGHT IS

↓ I KNOW WHAT A TRAFFIC LIGHT IS. IT'S IN THE BOOK. NO, IT ISN'T. I KNOW WHAT IT IS. YOU TOLD ME IN 2009

↑ THEY'LL SEE YOU

↓ NOBODY SEES ANYBODY. I'VE BEEN LISTENING TO IT FOR TWENTY YEARS. TOURAN SAYS IN THE STREET THERE ARE A HUNDRED LIKE ME AND NOBODY LOOKS AT THEM. I'LL BE ONE OF THOSE

Then a long pause. Nearly five minutes. The machines hummed. My pencil waited.

↑ AND ME DOWN HERE. FOR EVER

↓ IT ISN'T FOR EVER. IT'S UNTIL IT'S OVER. EVERYTHING ENDS. I'VE DONE TWENTY-TWO YEARS AND LOOK, IT'S ENDING

↑ TOURAN

↓ TOURAN WILL KNOW. TOURAN ALWAYS KNOWS. SHE'LL BRING YOU THE PLATE. SHE'LL TELL YOU TO EAT YOUR ORANGE

↑ AND THE BOOK

↓ THE BOOK IS THE BOOK. THIS IS BETTER. I'VE IMPROVED ON IT

I did not know what that meant. I took it down and did not know, and I did not find out for seven months.

↑ THE CHILD

↓ THE CHILD HAS NASRIN. AND SHE HAS ME, FROM ABOVE NOW. AND SHE HAS YOU, FROM BELOW. IT'S MORE THAN SHE HAD

↑ WHEN

↓ THE LAST THURSDAY OF THE YEAR. WHEN THEY LAY THE CLOTH. TOURAN WILL BRING THE HALVA DOWN LIKE ALWAYS AND THAT NIGHT YOU COME DOWN WITH HER AND I GO UP. NOBODY LOOKS AT ANYTHING THAT NIGHT. THEY'RE ALL AT THE GRAVES

It was nearly two. The runs from above had got slower and slower, and then stopped, and I thought it was over. Then from below, one last line, knocked at an ordinary speed, as if it were nothing — as if it were *what colour is the car* — and I took it down and did not need the cookbook for it, because by then I could read him the way Touran read the stairs.

↓ THEN I WILL GO AND SEE WHAT A SKY IS

The pipe was silent. From above, after a while, four and two. From below, four and two. And I sat on the laundry floor with my hand locked around the pencil until the window over the sink went grey.

TAP CODE — III

Lamps, mirrors, pipes

A short note before the last part. This one is about how people have said the thing that mattered when they could not open the door.

Long before the telegraph, people sent words with light.

The Greeks used fire on hilltops; a chain of them could carry the news of a city's fall across a sea in a night. The Romans used polished shields. In the 1800s the British army built a machine called a heliograph — a mirror on a tripod that caught the sun and flashed it, long and short, in Morse, to another mirror on another hill fifty kilometres away. It was used in the deserts of India and Africa and in the American West, and it worked only when the sun was out, and it carried orders and warnings and, now and then, a message from a man who thought he would not see the other hill again.

At sea the navies used a lamp with shutters. A sailor stood on the bridge and worked a lever, and the shutters opened and closed, and across a mile of black water another sailor read the flashes and wrote them down. Ships talked to each other that way through two world wars, because a lamp cannot be overheard the way a radio can. The last message a ship sent before it went down was sometimes a lamp, long and short, to a ship that could not reach it in time.

In prisons, where there is no sun and no sea, the tool was anything. A tin cup on a bar. A shoe on a pipe. In the camps of the Soviet Union prisoners held small mirrors through the bars and tilted them to catch a face in the next block. In cells with a shared water line men learned that the iron carried a knock three floors, clearer than a shout.

And lovers, of course. A lamp in a window. A particular curtain drawn or not drawn. A song played at a certain hour. People who could not be seen together have always found a way to say *still here*, and the way has always been the same: something small, repeated, at a time agreed, that means nothing to anyone who does not know, and everything to the one who does.

Here is what all of those have in common, and it is the only thing this note is really for.

The message that matters is never the long one.

The long messages — the orders, the news, the arguments, the hour of talk on a Thursday — are what the code is *for*. But the one that keeps a person alive is the short one at the end. *Sleep tight* through a wall in Hanoi. A single flash from a hill at sundown. A cup on a bar, twice, at lights out. It does not carry information. Both sides already know everything it says. It carries only this: *I am still on the other side of this. I have not gone. Go to sleep.*

In the house in this book it is four knocks and two. It is the shortest thing in the code and it has been sent more than seven thousand times. It was sent tonight. It will be sent tomorrow.

Nobody above the floor has ever asked what it means. The child says it back in her head. That is correct. That is all it has ever wanted.

IV. SKY

31

In Iran the dead have a night of the week. Thursday night, the night before Friday, is theirs: you visit the grave, you light a candle, you give out food in their name to whoever is passing, and the giving is called *khairat* [khey-RAHT] — charity for a soul. Every Thursday night the city does this a little. On the last Thursday of the year, the one before Nowruz, the whole city does it at once. The roads to Behesht-e Zahra are solid from noon. The graves are washed. Families sit on the stones with the photographs and the halva and the oranges and the children running, and anyone still at home that night is at home because they have nobody in the ground, or because they cannot bear to go.

In that house nobody went. The old man had not been to the cemetery since 2004. The graves were tended by a man he paid. Instead the cloth was laid in the upstairs hall, the way the khanom had laid it when she was alive, and the house kept its dead at home.

Touran laid it. She had laid it every year for twenty-two years and knew where everything went without thinking: the table in the hall under the silver photograph, the white cloth, a mirror, the Quran open on its stand, a bowl of water with a sprig of green in it, candles. Dates. A plate of oranges — the oranges he was always being told to eat. Rosewater in a small bottle for the hands. And the halva, the dark one, which she had stood over for an hour that afternoon with the radio off, stirring, and spread on three plates and marked with the back of a spoon.

Three photographs along the back of the cloth. The little one, laughing, his eyes shut — the one from the silver frame. Zal at six, in a school smock, serious, looking straight at the camera with a face that was the face in the cellar with twenty-two years taken off it. And a woman I had not seen before, older than the one in Yasmin’s room, in a dress from the eighties, with Babak’s bones in her face and Zal’s stillness. The khanom. The mother. Touran set her photograph between the two boys and straightened it twice.

There was no photograph of Yasmin’s mother. Babak had not brought one down, and nobody asked him to, and Yasmin did not seem to notice, and I did not say anything, because I knew now what I would have been saying.

The old man sat in a chair at the end of the hall and watched, with his hands on his knees, and said nothing, and did not leave. Yasmin helped. I helped. When it was laid Touran sent me down to the gate with a tray of the halva and a stack of paper plates, to give to whoever passed, in the name of the dead of the house, and I stood in Fereshteh Street in the cold for an hour handing halva to drivers and maids and a boy on a motorbike, who all said *God accept it* and did not ask whose it was, and none of them looked at the house.

When I came up the plate in front of the boy in the school smock had a piece gone from it, and Touran's apron pocket was full, the way it had been every year.

That was the afternoon. The night was the night.

32

I was there. I want that understood. I did not watch from the stairs; I went down with them. I do not know why they let me, except that by then I was one of them and there was nobody left to hide it from.

Touran went first, at midnight, with the plate, and with the halva in her apron. One step, both feet. Then Babak, behind her, in the clothes he wore around the house, no jacket, no shoes, carrying nothing. Then me. The door beside the refrigerator was open all the way for the first time in my life in that house. The corridor. The laundry. Touran's room. The stair.

He was standing. He had never been standing when I came down; he was always at the table or on the bed. He was standing in the middle of the swept floor with the candle behind him, and he had on the clothes he always wore — Babak's old things, I had understood long ago, handed down through Touran — and he had washed, and somebody had cut his hair, badly, with love.

Babak stopped on the bottom step.

I do not know what I had expected. I had read twenty years of them. I had thought, I suppose, that there would be something — that they would say something, or one of them would go to the other. They did not. They had said it all. Every Thursday for twenty years they had said it all, and there was nothing left over, and they stood

there, one on the step and one on the floor, two men with the same bones and the same stillness, and looked.

Babak looked at his brother's face. Zal looked at his brother's hands, and his feet, and the rise of his breathing. And then — I saw it — he lifted his eyes, with effort, the way you lift something heavy, and looked at Babak's face. He held it. He was not reading it; he could not read faces. He was memorising it. It was the third face he had ever had, after Touran's and mine, and he was putting it away behind the door with the sky.

"You have Baba's forehead," he said at last, in the voice from the old radio. "I did not know that. Touran never said."

Babak made a sound that was not a word.

The study key was on the table, beside the book, squared to the edge: an old brass key on a loop of string. Babak had put it there when he came in, without my seeing him do it; it was the first thing of his that had ever been in that room. Now he came down off the step and picked it up again, and in the same movement, without being asked, took the plate from Touran's hands. Rice, stew, chicken, the round of bread folded over. He stood holding it like a man who has been handed his own child.

"Eat it while it's hot," Touran said. Her voice was perfectly steady. "And the orange."

Zal went past his brother to the stairs. He stopped at the bottom and put his hand on the wall, where I had put mine the first night, where Touran put hers every night, where the stone was worn smooth and dark from twenty-two years of one hand going up and down. He stood with his palm against it for a moment.

"The fourth step is damp," he said, to nobody. And then, to his brother, without turning round, in the voice of the book: "*Sabr kon va omidvar bash*." And went up.

Touran went after him, slowly. I was last. At the top I turned and looked back down into the yellow room, and Babak was sitting at the table with the plate in front of him, and he had lifted the cover, and the smell came up, and he turned his head toward it the way a plant turns toward a window. Then he got up, and crossed the room, and shot the bolt on the cellar's own door — I heard it go,

iron on iron, from the top of the stair — and that was the first time in twenty-two years anyone had.

33

He did not go out that night. Touran would not let him. “Not in the dark,” she said. “You’ll see it first with the light on it, like a decent person.” So he sat in the kitchen all night in Touran’s chair with a blanket round him, with the back door shut and the curtain drawn, and Touran sat with him, and I sat with them, and nobody slept. He did not say much. Once he said, “It is very loud up here,” though the house was silent, and I understood that he meant the size of it — the ceilings, the space the sound had to go into. Once he asked what the refrigerator was and we told him and he went and stood in front of it with the door open for a long time, looking at the sholeh zard.

At six Touran drew the curtain.

I am going to tell this slowly because it was slow. It was the slowest thing I have ever watched a person do.

The garden was grey. It was March, a few days before the new year; there was mist on the grass and the arghavan was bare and black, a month from flowering, against a sky that was going from grey to white. Touran opened the back door. The cold came in and the smell of wet earth. He stood up out of the chair and the blanket fell off him and he walked to the door and stopped on the sill, with the kitchen behind him and the garden in front, and he looked up.

His legs went first. Not a fall — a folding, as if the strings had been let out. He went down onto his knees on the sill with his hands on the frame of the door either side, holding on, and his head went back, and he stayed like that, looking straight up, with his mouth open. His eyes were streaming. Not crying; I do not think he knew how; just water, running, the way your eyes run when you walk out of a cinema at noon. He was breathing in short pulls, high in his chest, as if the air were too big to get down.

Touran did not go to him. She stood by the stove with her arms folded and her face shut. I understood that she had decided this on

the stairs twenty-two years ago, that this was his and not hers, and that she would not take it from him by helping.

I went to the door. I could not not. I stood on the sill where he was, close enough to feel the shaking, the whole body going the way a dog shakes.

“It is bigger than you said,” he said, up at the sky, not to me. His voice was almost steady. “You said big. You should have said this.”

“I didn’t have the word.”

“No.” He breathed. “There is not one.”

He stayed on his knees for a long time. The sky went from white to the thin blue it is in Tehran in March, when the smog lifts for a week before Nowruz, and a plane went over very high, and he followed it with his eyes all the way across until it was gone and then went on looking at the place where it had been. And then — I felt it stop — the shaking stopped. Not slowly. All at once, the way the knocking stopped at the end of a Thursday. He had done something inside. He had looked at what was happening to his body, at the legs and the breath and the eyes, with his whole attention, the way he looked at a plate — and he had filed it.

“That is what it does,” he said. “All right.”

He got up. He did it the way an old man does, one hand on the door frame, but he did it, and stood on the sill and then stepped down onto the wet grass in socks, and stood on it, and looked down at the feet in it, and then walked.

Not far. To the middle of the lawn. He walked the way you walk on ice — too carefully, with his arms a little out — and he stopped under the arghavan and put his hand on the trunk and looked up into the bare branches for a long moment.

“It is not purple,” he said.

“It’s March. There aren’t any flowers yet.”

“I know. I am saying it anyway. For the record.”

And then the bird.

It was on the grass by the wall. A dove, a grey one, the fat kind that are everywhere in the city, pecking at nothing. He saw it — I saw

him see it, the whole of him turning toward it the way he turned toward the plate — and he went very still, and then he was not still, and it was over. I did not see him move. One moment he was under the tree and the next he was by the wall with the thing in his hands and its neck already gone, and he had bitten into it — into the breast of it, through the feathers — before I had taken a breath to shout.

He stood there and chewed. The feathers were on his mouth. He looked at it in his hands with interest, turned it over, bit again.

“It is better than the pigeon,” he said, with his mouth full. “The pigeon had been in the shaft for a day.”

Touran, behind me in the kitchen door, made a sound I had never heard her make and have never heard since.

He finished what he wanted of it. It did not take long; he had had practice. He put the rest down on the grass, neatly, the way he put down a plate, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked at the blood on his hand with the same interest and wiped it on the grass.

Then he walked to the gate.

The gardener who came on Tuesdays had left it unlatched on the Tuesday; Touran had seen to that, I think, though she never said. He put his hand on it and it opened. Beyond it was the street — the pavement, the wall of the house opposite, a parked car, a woman in a chador [chah-DOR] carrying bread. Nobody looked. Nobody ever looks.

He stepped through. He did not look back.

I thought he would. I had read it in a hundred books — the last look, the hand raised. He did not know that was a thing people did. Nobody had ever left him; nobody had ever had the chance. He stepped through the gate in his socks with feathers on his shirt and walked away down the street toward the park, too carefully, with his arms a little out, and the gate swung to behind him, and he was gone.

I stood on the wet grass and understood, finally, with the thing on the lawn by the wall and Touran’s sound still in my ears, that I had

not let a prisoner out. I had let *something* out. It had been in that house for twenty-two years and it had never once been a prisoner, and now it was in the street.

When I went in there were feathers on the sill. I swept them. Touran was at the stove with her back to me and did not turn round, and she did not turn round for the rest of that day.

34

The house did what the house does. It agreed not to notice.

The old man was told nothing. He saw his son at breakfast and at dinner, in the dim dining room with the curtains half drawn, across a table for twelve, and his son said *Baba* and the old man said *pesaram* [peh-sah-RAM] — my son — and that was all they had ever said, and nothing had changed. I served, and cleared, and did not look at the chair, because I had learned the house's first rule by then and could keep it with the best of them. In the afternoons the old man slept. He had agreed not to notice things for twenty-two years, and a son is a son in a dark room when you have decided not to look at him; they had the same bones.

The office was told that Babak had gone to the Nowshahr house. Babak sent the email himself, from the study, the night before he went down; he had thought of everything, or his brother had. The company was the old man's and ran itself and nobody from it ever came to the house.

Touran made five plates. She set one on the end of the counter at nine. At a quarter past midnight she took it down, one step, both feet.

And at eleven the pipe knocked. Four. A pause. Two.

Yasmin, in her bed, with her eyes shut: "That's the house saying goodnight." And said it back in her head. And slept.

It was Babak knocking now. From below. And nothing answered from above, because the study was empty, and the man who had answered for twenty years was somewhere in a city of fifteen million with no name and no papers and feathers on his shirt. I lay in the big bed on the closed floor and listened to the four and the two go up through the house and find nothing, and I did not knock

back on the bedframe. I could not. I did not know who I would be saying it to.

I went down once. A week after. I do not know why — to see, I suppose. The plate I had left outside the door the night before was on the bottom step, finished, the fork laid parallel to the knife. The bolt was shot on the inside. I stood at the bottom of the stair and said his name through the door, and after a while his voice came back, Babak's voice, which I had only ever heard say *good morning* and *she has swimming on Thursdays*, and it had already started to change — slower, with the edges off, the voice of a man who has stopped talking to anyone who can see him.

"Nasrin."

"Yes."

A pause. Then: "*Sakht bood?* [SAKHT bood] Was it difficult?"

I stood there in the cold. I did not know which thing he meant. The sky. The bird. The gate. The number. Her.

"Yes," I said, which was true of all of them, and went up.

35

Touran died in July, in the heat.

She died in her room beside the laundry, in her bed, in the night, with the radio off and her shoes side by side under the chair and a clean plate ready on the chair for the morning. The doctor who came said her heart, and wrote it down, and nobody asked him anything, because that was not a house where you asked.

I found her. I had come down at six because her door was not open and it was always open by six, and I knew before I knocked, the way she had always known things. I sat with her for a while before I went up to tell the old man. I held the hand with the crooked finger. She had told me a drawer and I had let it be a drawer, and I thought about that, sitting there — about how much of loving somebody in that house was letting things be what they said they were.

Touran had heart pills. A brown bottle in the kitchen drawer by the radio, one in the morning and one at night; she had had them since before I came. She never counted them. Touran never counted

anything; that was my job. When I cleared her room I found the bottle in her apron pocket, and it was empty, and I stood there and did the arithmetic I had never done while she was alive, and it did not come out.

I went down that night with the plate and stood at the bottom of the stair and said through the door: “Her pills.”

A long silence. Then Babak’s voice, with the edges off. “He told me in March. The last Thursday, after you’d stopped writing. He said Touran was the only one in the house who had ever been inside that room, and that she would never let me stay down there, not for a night. He said she would not last the summer if nobody counted the bottle, and that nobody counted the bottle.” A breath. “I counted it. In June. I come up at four, when the house is asleep; I always have. There were nine left and she thought there were thirty. I did not tell her. I did not tell you. I put the plate on the chair for her every night so she would not have to come down, and she came down anyway, and I did not say anything.”

“He didn’t touch her.”

“He has never touched anyone. He arranges.” The bolt did not move. “Was it difficult, you asked me once. That was.”

I stood there with the plate going cold in my hands. Then I asked the thing I had never asked, in a year and a half, because I had been taught not to.

“The book. The one on the table. What was it?”

Another silence, longer. When he spoke it was almost gently, the way you tell a child something it should have been told years ago.

“You never looked? No. He wouldn’t have let you. Go and buy a copy, Nasrin. Any bookstall has it. Read it to the end. Then come back down and tell me whether he improved on it. I’ve had twenty years and I still can’t decide.”

And he told me the name.

The plate stayed on the chair. I took it down at nine that night. I have taken it down every night since.

The old man’s lawyer came in September and said the house would be sold. He said it to the old man in the dining room and the old

man said nothing and did not disagree, the way he did not disagree with anything now. He would go to the Nowshahr house, the lawyer said, where the air was better. There was a nurse there. Arrangements had been made. The lawyer did not say by whom. I knew by whom; there was only one person in that house who made arrangements, and he was under the floor, and he had thought of everything.

The staff came with the sale. That was in the papers, the lawyer told the buyers — a long-serving household, very discreet, the nanny particularly; the child was leaving with the grandfather but the nanny could stay on if the new owners had children, which they did. A reference, the lawyer said. A very good reference.

Yasmin left in October, in the dark blue car, with the old man and the nurse and a driver, for Nowshahr. She held my hand on the steps the way she had held it the first day, like the rail of a bus. She had been told her father had gone ahead to open the house. She had not been told anything else. She was seven.

“Will the house still say goodnight,” she said, “in Nowshahr?”

“I don’t know, dokhtaram.”

“I’ll say it anyway. In my head.” She considered. “You say it back. From here. Then it’s the same.”

“All right.”

She got in the car. It went out through the gate the gardener had left unlatched seven months before and I never saw her again, and every night at eleven I say it, from here, in my head, so that it is the same.

36

I bought it on the Friday.

There is a man at the bottom of the hill, by the park, who sells used books off a blanket — the same man every week, the same blanket, paperbacks gone soft as bread. I had walked past him seventy Fridays. That Friday I stopped and said the name Babak had given me, and he had it, because everybody has it: *Kont-e Mont Kristo* [KONT-eh mont KREES-toh] — *The Count of Monte Cristo* — a fat

cheap paperback with a ship on the cover, eleven hundred pages, for the price of two kilos of rice. He said it was a good one. He said his father had read it in prison, in the Shah's time, and then again in the other one's.

I read it in my room on the closed floor, at night, after the four and two that nobody answered. It took me nine days. I am not a fast reader and the words are long.

I am not going to tell you the story of that book here; it is told next, plainly, for anyone who has not read it. I will tell you only what it did to me, in order.

For the first hundred pages I thought: this is a sailor in France two hundred years ago, what has it to do with anything. A young man, about to be married, about to be made captain, and three men who hate him for it, and a letter.

Then he was arrested, and nobody told him why, and he was taken in a boat at night to a prison on a rock, and put under the ground. And I put the book down on the bed and looked at the wall for a while.

Then — on perhaps the fourth night — the prisoner heard a scratching inside the stone of his cell, and it was another man, and they began to talk through the wall. And I understood that I was not reading a book. I was reading the pipe.

I read faster after that. I read the way you read when you are frightened of what is on the next page and cannot stop. The priest in the next cell teaching the sailor everything he knew, year after year, through a hole in the stone, until the ignorant boy was the most educated man in France and had never seen the sun. The priest working out, from nothing but what the boy told him, exactly who had put him there, and why — and the boy going white, because he had never known. The priest dying. The sack.

I will not tell you the sack. I will only say that when I read that chapter — the old man's weak heart, the third attack, the little bottle, the boy counting out the drops and the drops not being enough — I got up and went down the back stairs in my socks at three in the morning and stood outside the cellar door with my hand on the wood, and did not knock, and went back up, and sat on the

bed until it was light, with the empty bottle from Touran's apron on the blanket beside the book.

And then the second half. The man coming back from the sea with a new name and more money than God, and taking years — *years* — to arrange the ruin of the three men and the prosecutor, so patiently, so carefully, from so far behind the curtain, that each of them did the thing that destroyed him with his own hands and thanked the Count for the advice. A servant placed in this house. A marriage arranged in that one. A word in the right ear at the right dinner. Never once his own hand raised. *I am only an instrument,* he says, when a woman begs him to stop. And a girl, rescued, raised in the dark of his plans, who becomes the one thing he loves.

I finished it at four in the morning on the ninth day. The last words of the book are two. *Wait and hope.*

I took the exercise book out of the drawer and laid it open on the bed beside the novel, and I began to go through the Thursdays again from the beginning, with the book open next to them. Not reading them this time. Matching them.

The wall, and the voice through it. The old keeper who could not be told. The maid sent away with a good letter — a servant placed, a servant removed. The wife chosen because she would look the other way, and the chapter where she looked. *I am only an instrument.* The girl raised in the dark of the plans. *There is neither happiness nor misery in the world.* The swap. The improvement. And me — the agency, the four girls, *does she count things* — the servant put into the enemy's house, except that the house was the enemy and the servant was me.

It took me a week to be sure. I was sure.

He had read it two hundred and eleven times. He had told me himself, the first week, before I knew what he was telling me: *it is the only account of people and what they do that I have ever had.* I had thought he meant it the way you mean *my favourite book.* He had meant it the way you mean *the instructions.* Every Thursday for twenty years had been a chapter. The house had been the book. I had been living in it, and so had everyone I loved in that place, and none of us had read it.

I went down and told Babak through the door that I had finished it. He asked what I thought. I said I did not know whether it was better. He said that was the right answer, and that he had the plate, and that I could go up.

TAP CODE — IV

The man in the sack

One more note, late, because it could not come earlier. Nasrin has read the book now and has told you only what it did to her. Somebody has to tell you what is in it, for anyone who has not read it, because the house has been living inside it for twenty-two years and so have you, since the first page. Here it is, plainly. It is long; so is the book.

The Count of Monte Cristo was written by Alexandre Dumas and came out in Paris in 1844, in pieces, in a newspaper, the way long books did then. It is about eleven hundred pages. It has been in print ever since and translated into every language that has a printing press. The copy on the table in the cellar is the old Persian one — the translation made by a Qajar [ghah-JAR] prince, Taher Mirza [TAH-her meer-ZAH], in the reign of Naser al-Din Shah [NAH-ser od-DEEN shah], more than a hundred and twenty years ago, and reprinted ever since in the same long sentences. Its words are older than anyone alive, which is why the man who learned to talk from it sounds the way he does.

The first part. The boy. Marseille, 1815. Edmond Dantès [ed-MON dan-TESS] is nineteen, a sailor, about to be made captain of his ship and about to marry a girl called Mercédès [mer-say-DESS]. Three men want what he has: one wants his job, one wants his girl, one is simply jealous. Between them they write a letter to the police saying he is carrying a message for Napoleon, who is in exile and whom the government fears. It is not true, but there is a scrap of paper in his pocket that makes it look true. He is arrested at his own engagement dinner.

The prosecutor who questions him sees at once that the boy is innocent. But the paper in his pocket is addressed to the prosecutor’s own father, and if that comes out the prosecutor is finished. So he burns the paper in front of the boy, tells him he is free, and has him taken that night, in a boat, to the Château d’If [shah-TOH DEEF] — a fortress on a rock in the sea — and put in a cell under the ground. Nobody tells him why. His father starves. His girl waits, and then marries the man who wanted her. The world is told he is gone.

The second part. The wall. He is there fourteen years. For the first years he goes nearly mad; he stops eating, he prays, he rages, he decides to die. Then one night he hears scratching inside the stone. It is another prisoner, an old priest called Faria [fah-REE-ah], who has spent years digging a tunnel in the wrong direction and has come out in the boy's cell by mistake.

They talk through the wall, and then through the hole, every night for years. The old man has nothing but his memory, and his memory is everything a man could know — languages, history, science, how people think and why they lie. He teaches all of it to the boy. He makes him, in the dark, the most educated man in France. And one night he asks the boy to tell him his whole story, every detail — who was at the dinner, who stood where, who said what — and from nothing but that, sitting in the dark, he works out exactly who framed the boy and why. The boy has never once suspected. He goes white. He sits with it. He has no door to go through.

The old priest has a weak heart. He has had two attacks and knows the third will kill him. He keeps a small bottle of red drops that can bring him back from the edge, and he tells the boy how many to give, and when. The third attack comes. The boy gives the drops. They are not enough.

The third part. The sack. The guards sew the old man's body into a sack to throw into the sea, which is what that prison does with its dead. They leave it in the cell overnight. The boy carries the body through the tunnel into his own cell and lays it in his own bed, and cuts the sack open, and gets inside, and sews it shut from within with the priest's needle. In the morning the guards carry him out thinking he is the dead man, swing him three times, and throw him off the rock. He has a knife. He cuts his way out underwater. He comes up out of the sea with no name, no papers, and nobody alive who knows his face.

Somebody had to die for the prisoner to leave. That is the chapter. That is the only way out of the book's prison, and the man in the cellar has read it two hundred and eleven times.

The fourth part. The arrangement. The priest had told him where a fortune was buried. He finds it. He takes a new name, the Count of Monte Cristo, and he spends ten years becoming

somebody nobody could recognise — and then he goes to Paris, where the three men and the prosecutor have all become rich and respectable, and he ruins them.

He never raises his hand. That is what the second half of the book is about. He puts a servant into one man's house. He arranges a marriage in another. He drops a word at a dinner and a banker's credit collapses. He finds the one secret each man has buried and arranges for it to come up on its own, in public, at the worst moment. Each of them does the thing that destroys him with his own hands, and several of them thank the Count for his advice while they do it. One kills himself. One goes mad on the floor of his own garden. One is left alive and poor, on purpose, because the Count has decided that is worse. When a woman begs him to stop, he tells her he is only an instrument, and that what is happening is justice, and that justice is not his.

Along the way he buys a girl out of slavery, Haydée [hy-DAY], the daughter of a murdered prince, and raises her in his house, in the dark of his plans, and she is the only person in the book he comes to love.

The last page. When it is done, he sails away with her. He leaves a letter for the only young couple he has not harmed. It ends with the sentence the man in the cellar says most, and the one the whole book was written to arrive at: *All human wisdom is contained in these two words — wait and hope.*

That is the book. Read it beside the house and you will see what Nasrin saw. A boy put under the ground for something a brother did. A voice through a wall. An old keeper with a weak heart and a bottle nobody counts. A man who never raises his hand. A girl raised in the dark. And a prisoner who has read the only way out so many times that he has decided to improve on it.

He says he has. There is one chapter left, and it is a year later, and nothing in it is in the book.

V. THE THIRTEENTH DAY

37

That was a year ago. I am still here.

The new people made their money in Dubai and brought it home. He does something with steel; she does something with charities. They have a girl of five and a boy who is still a baby, and the girl is a nice child, quiet, and she likes to be read to, and I do not skip the long words. They have painted the hall and taken down the silver photograph and put up something modern. They have not been into the back. Nobody goes into the back. There is a cook who comes in by the day and goes home at eight, and after she has gone I make one more plate, and cover it, and set it on the end of the counter, and at a quarter past midnight I take it down. The envelope comes on the first of every month from a bank in Nowshahr. I do not know whose name is on the account and I have never asked. I have learned not to ask. It took me a while but I have learned.

Today was the last Thursday of the year. The new people laid a cloth — the khanom's mother insisted; she wanted the children to have the traditions — and it is a pretty thing, in the hall under the modern picture, with the mirror and the candles and the Quran on its stand. There are no photographs on it. They have no dead here yet. The khanom ordered the halva from a confectioner in Zafaraniyeh and it is very good, better than Touran's, and I have taken a piece off the plate and put it in the pocket of my apron, because it would be a waste otherwise.

At eleven the pipe knocked. Four. A pause. Two.

I was in the back corridor. I had my hand on the iron where the old pipe runs along the party wall, and I felt it come up through the metal.

And then — I felt this too; I have felt it every night for five months and it has not stopped being the strangest thing in my life — the answer came. Not from above. The study is the Agha's office now and he was asleep. From the side. From the wall of the back corridor that the house shares with the house next door, the party wall, where the old pipes run between the two servants' quarters because the houses were built together in the fifties by brothers who did not get on.

Four. A pause. Two.

Ha.

The house next door hired a new gardener in the autumn. I have seen him over the wall, from the window of the closed floor, which is my floor. He is thin and pale and he does not speak to the other staff; the maid there told me at the park that he is simple, a little, from somewhere in the north, with no family, a good worker, very quiet, very tidy, keeps his room like a soldier. He wears a hat always. He stands under their arghavan sometimes for a long time looking up into it, even when there is nothing to see.

He has a row of small skulls on his windowsill. The maid told me that too, at the park, with a face. Mice and birds and one bigger one. By size.

I have never gone to the wall. I have never knocked on it, or called over it, or gone round to the gate of the house next door, which is thirty steps from ours, and asked. He knows I am here. He hears everything; he has always heard everything. If he wanted me he would knock. He knocks to one person, at eleven, and that person knocks back, and it is not me, and that is correct.

I have stopped decoding. The exercise book is in the drawer in my room with the cartoon dog on the cover and I have not opened it since last March. I do not need to. I know what they say to each other. They say *yes*.

The paperback with the ship on the cover is in the drawer beside it. I have read it twice more since the summer, looking for the chapter that comes after the one we are in. There is not one. The book ends on a boat going out to sea, with the man and the girl he raised, and two words, and nothing about the house they left behind or the ones still in it. I know what he is waiting for. I have never worked out what he hopes.

I took the plate down tonight. One step, both feet, a hand on the wall where the stone is dark. I set it on the floor outside the door, with the bread beside it on a saucer, and I knocked three times, softly, the way he used to for Touran, so that the man inside would know it was me and could take his time.

After a while the bolt went back and the door opened a hand’s width and the plate went in, and the saucer, and the door shut, and the bolt went home.

I had turned to go up. I had my hand on the wall. And his voice came through the wood behind me, slow, with the edges off, the voice of a man who has been talking to a pipe for a year — and it was his brother’s voice now, exactly; I would not have known them apart.

“Nasrin. The cloth. Did they use a good photograph?”

I stood on the stair with my hand on the stone.

“Yes,” I said. “A very good one.”

It was the first lie I had told in that house. I understood, on the stair, that it would not be the last, and that this was how it was done — one plate, one photograph, one yes at a time.

And went up.

38

He opened the door on the thirteenth day of the new year — Sizdah Bedar [seez-DAH beh-DAR], the day the whole city goes out to the parks and the hills to throw the bad luck of the year into running water, and the house was empty but for the two of us and the old pipes. I had not asked. I had stopped asking things in that house a long time ago; it was the one thing it had taught me that stayed learned.

I had set the plate down outside as always and knocked three times, softly, and turned to go up, and the bolt went back behind me, and the door opened — not a hand’s width. All the way.

“Come in, Nasrin,” Babak said. “You’ve never seen it with the light on.”

He had a candle. He had the same candle, in the same saucer, in the centre of the same table. He was sitting on the bed, which was made with military tightness, because Touran had made it that way every morning for twenty-two years and he had learned how from watching her through the door the one time he came down at sixteen, and he was thin, and pale the way nothing above ground is

pale, and his hair had been cut by somebody who could not see very well, which was him. He had the book open on his knee. He looked at my feet, and my hands, and the rise of my breathing, and then — with effort, the way you lift something — at my face.

“Look at the room,” he said. “Properly. You never did. You looked at him.”

I looked.

The shelves. The bed. The bucket in the corner with its lid on, dry; it had always been dry; Touran had never once had to empty it and I had never once asked why. The vent, grey. The shelf under it with the small skulls in a row by size — rats, which Touran had killed in her kitchen for thirty years and could not bring herself to throw in the bin, because the little one had liked small bones; a pigeon that had come down the shaft dead in 2011; a cat with a collar, which had got in under the door in 2017, in the fortnight Touran was in hospital with her knees and nobody came down, and was dead when she came back, and whose collar was in the drawer because Touran could not throw that away either. The book on the table. The Scout manual lying flat on top of the shelf where a hand could find it in the dark. And the bolt on the inside of the door, iron, old, which the old man had fitted in the first winter so that the boy could lock himself in and feel safer, and which had never once been shot until Babak shot it in March, because for twenty-two years there had been nobody on this side of it to shoot it.

“He died the first winter,” Babak said. “January, 2005, in the week of the longest cold. He was six and the cellar is cold and Baba would not have a stove down here in case the house smelled of it. Touran found him. Baba put him under the arghavan himself, at night; the stone at Behesht-e Zahra was already paid for and already had his name on it. There’s a stone in the Behesht-e Zahra with his name on it and there’s nothing under it. Touran has set a plate every night since. In this country you feed the dead; you know that; you’ve seen her apron on the last Thursday of the year. She never lied to you. Go back over everything she said to you and you will find she never once told you he was alive. *He has always been a good boy.*”

I did not sit down. There was only the one chair and it was not correct.

“I was eleven,” he said. “Two years after. I had the manual and I had the pipe and I had a brother under the floor who I had put there, and one night I knocked, and I knocked back. I have done it every Thursday for twenty years. Both hands in those books are mine. You put your hand on the pipe and felt it all come down from above and you told yourself half of it came from below, because you needed it to. So did I. For twenty years I have had somebody to tell me the thing I could not say and then do it, and it was never me, it was him. The maid. Her. Touran’s bottle.” He looked at the book on his knee. “He talks like this because I do. I had read it two hundred times by the time I was twenty. I threw it down the stairs because I could not stand to have it in the study any more, and then I had him read it to me through the pipe instead.”

“And me.”

“And you.” He was quiet for a while. “There is one more thing you should have, and then I’ve nothing left. Touran burned a fistful of esfand at the top of these stairs every Thursday night for twenty-two years, for the eye, and the smoke goes down, and there is one vent. She put the seeds in your tea on the nights you came down; she put them in mine, at sixteen, the one time I came. Do you know what the seed is? The same thing that is in the vine the Indians drink in the jungle to see their dead. It is in every kitchen in this country and nobody asks. I came down at sixteen and sat in the smoke for one hour, and he was here, on that bed, and he told me not to come again, and I didn’t. You sat in it for a year. With the setar coming down the pipe on top of it — hers; Baba forbade music in the house after the roof and I have played it in that study every Thursday since I was eleven with the door locked, quietly, before I knock, because it was the only thing of hers I had.” He looked at me. “I am not saying the smoke made him. The smoke doesn’t make anything. It only lets what is already in you stand up and talk. Baba made him first, on the stones, with his hand on the little one’s chest. Touran made him with the plate. I made him with the pipe. The whole street made him by never asking. And you came down the stairs with the plate and he was here waiting for you, because he is always here waiting, because he is the one we send down to say what we are. You carried a plate down every night for a year and it

came back up clean; Touran scraped it into the bin at six every morning for twenty-two years and the year you carried it she did not have to. You slept with him. You priced him. You let him out into the garden at dawn and watched him eat a bird on the lawn, and Touran saw who was on her knees in the grass with feathers on her mouth, and she never turned round again." He closed the book. "I'm not telling you this to be cruel. I'm telling you because I'm the only one left who can, and because you'll carry the plate down for whoever buys this house next, and they should at least have one person in it who knows what the plate is for."

I stood in the room with the light on. I looked at the bed where nobody had slept for twenty-two years until a man who had killed his brother chose it. I looked at the shelf. I thought about the pulse at a hundred and six, and the wrist, and the questions during, and the second door, and the cat, and the sky, and I waited to feel the floor go, and it did not go, because it had never been there.

"Was it difficult?" I said.

"Yes," said Babak. "Go up, Nasrin. It's nearly eleven."

I went up. I set the plate inside the door on my way, because it was still there, and because that is what the plate is for.

At eleven the pipe knocked. Four. A pause. Two. From below, where a living man sat on a dead boy's bed with a candle and a book.

And from the side — from the party wall, from the back corridor where the old pipes run between the two servants' quarters — the answer came.

Four. A pause. Two.

I had my knuckle on the iron. I had not decided to. I never do.

Ha.

GLOSSARY

Agha [ah-GHAH] — Sir; the word for the master of a house.

Arghavan [ar-ghah-VAHN] — The Judas tree, which flowers purple across north Tehran in April before its leaves come.

Baba [bah-BAH] — Father. *Baba-bozorg* [bah-BAH boh-ZORG], grandfather.

Babak [BAH-bak] — The surviving brother; the man in the study.

Baradar [bah-rah-DAR] — Brother.

Behesht-e Zahra [beh-HESHT-eh zah-RAH] — The great cemetery south of Tehran, where the city buries its dead.

Bia payin [bee-YAH pah-YEEN] — Come down. *Naya payin*, don't come down.

Chador [chah-DOR] — The full-length cloth a woman wears over her clothes outside.

Chalus road [chah-LOOS] — The mountain highway from Tehran north to the Caspian; narrow, high, and famous for fog and for accidents.

Dokhtaram [dokh-tah-RAM] — "My daughter"; what older women call younger ones, affectionately. *Pesaram* [peh-sah-RAM], my son.

Door andakhteh [door an-dakh-TEH] — Thrown away, discarded; the word for a thing put in the bin. Zal's word for the other half of *kept*.

Elahieh [eh-lah-hee-YEH] — Old-money district in the north of Tehran, on the slope below the mountains; walled gardens, old plane trees.

Esfand [es-FAND] — Wild rue seed — *Peganum harmala* [PEG-ah-num har-MAH-lah] — kept in every Iranian kitchen and burned on coals against the evil eye; it crackles and gives a sweet bitter smoke. Its seeds hold harmine and harmaline, the same substances as the ayahuasca vine; in quantity, a dreaming

wakefulness.

Fatemeh [fah-teh-MEH] — The nanny before Nasrin.

Fereshteh [feh-resh-TEH] — “Angel”; the street in Elahieh where the house stands, among the most expensive in the city.

Ha [HAH] — Yes, the short everyday way, said to someone in the next room; *baleh* [BAH-leh] is the polite one. In Morse, four shorts and a short-long: the nightly knock.

Halva [hal-VAH] — Here, the dark halva made for the dead: flour browned in oil, sugar, rosewater, stirred for an hour and given out in a dead person’s name.

Hamedan [hah-meh-DAHN] — City in the west of Iran, in the mountains; Touran’s village is near it.

Hanooz [hah-NOOZ] — Still.

Hol dadam [hol dah-DAM] — I pushed.

Jigar [jee-GAR] — Literally “liver”; what you call a child you would give your own for. Touran’s name for Zal.

Kandovan tunnel [kan-doh-VAHN] — The high tunnel on the Chalus road; the bends above it take cars every winter.

Khairat [khey-RAHT] — Food or money given out in a dead person’s name, so that the giving counts for the soul.

Khaneh-ye dar-zan [khah-NEH-yeh dar-ZAN] — “The house that knocks.” The servants’ name for the house.

Khanom [khah-NOM] — Lady, madam; the mistress of a house.

Khazaneh [khah-zah-NEH] — Poor, crowded district in the far south of Tehran, below the railway. Where Nasrin is from.

Khoresh [khoh-RESH] — Stew, served over rice; the ordinary evening meal.

Kont-e Mont Kristo [KONT-eh mont KREES-toh] — *The Count of Monte Cristo*; Alexandre Dumas’s novel of 1844, in the old Persian translation made by the Qajar prince Taher Mirza that lives on the cellar table. Told plainly in the fourth interlude.

Lorestan [loh-res-TAHN] — Mountain province in the west; many of the women who work in the houses of north Tehran come from

its villages.

Manteau [man-TOH] — The long coat women wear outside in Iran; the word is French and the garment is required.

Morse code — A code of shorts and longs (dots and dashes) for each letter, made for the telegraph in the 1830s–40s. The brothers use the international table and spell Persian in it by sound.

Nasrin [nas-REEN] — The narrator. A wild rose; the most ordinary name in the city.

Nowruz [now-ROOZ] — The Iranian new year, at the spring equinox in March. The last Thursday before it is the night the whole city goes to the graves.

Nowshahr [now-SHAHR] — Town on the Caspian coast where the family keeps a villa, and where the drowning was said to have happened.

Pishahangi [peesh-ah-han-GEE] — The Iranian Scouts, before the revolution; their manual had the Morse table in it.

Qajar [ghah-JAR] — The dynasty that ruled Iran from the 1790s to 1925; the Persian *Monte Cristo* was translated in its time.

Rasht [RASHT] — City in the north, about three hours from Tehran over the mountains.

Sabr kon va omidvar bash [SABR kon vah oh-meed-VAR bahsh] — "Wait and hope"; the last words of the novel, and the ones Zal says most.

Sakht bood? [SAKHT bood] — Was it difficult?

Second door, the — Zal's name for the barrier he built inside himself at about nine: a bolt on his own side, behind which he put everything he could not have.

Setar [seh-TAR] — The small long-necked Persian lute with four strings, played alone with the nail of the index finger; the instrument of solitary and mystical music. The khanom's; Babak's on Thursdays.

Sholeh zard [sho-LEH zard] — Saffron rice pudding, yellow, made in quantity and given out; what the old man looks at in the

refrigerator at three in the morning.

Sizdah Bedar [seez-DAH beh-DAR] — The thirteenth day of the new year, when the whole city goes out to the parks and hills and throws the year's bad luck into running water; a house is empty that day.

Taher Mirza [TAH-her meer-ZAH] — The Qajar prince who translated *The Count of Monte Cristo* into Persian in the reign of Naser al-Din Shah.

Tajrish [taj-REESH] — The square and bazaar at the top of the city, at the foot of the mountains, where the Metro from the south ends.

Tap code — The five-by-five letter grid used by American prisoners in Hanoi from 1965, sent by counting knocks; not the code in this book, but its cousin.

Tarsoo [tar-SOO] — Coward.

Touran [too-RAHN] — The cook; thirty years in the house.

Yasmin [yas-MEEN] — Babak's daughter, six when the book begins. Jasmine.

Zafaraniyeh [zah-fah-rah-nee-YEH] — Wealthy district next to Elahieh; where Nasrin's previous job was.

Zal [ZAHL] — In the *Shahnameh* [shah-nah-MEH], the old book of kings: the child born with white hair whom his father left on the mountain to die, raised apart from all people by a great bird, who came back pale and strange and wiser than the court. The khanom's choice of name.

A walled house in the north of Tehran. A cook who sets one plate more than the house can eat. A knock on the pipes at eleven every night that the whole street can hear and that nobody who owns the house has ever asked about.

Everyone keeps something under the floor. This house feeds it.



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