

ROYA
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No. 13

A STRANGER'S FAVORITE SONG

The Gharibān



C H E W Z

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A STRANGER'S FAVORITE SONG

آهنگ محبوب یک غریبه

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 13

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IN MEMORY OF A LOVING
AND CARING FATHER

SYNOPSIS

Ali cannot answer the three questions everyone asks at his father's memorial: what song he loved, what food he loved, what place he loved. He realises, sitting in the good chair reserved for a son, in a rented hall in Orange County eleven thousand kilometres from the grave, that he has spent a lifetime loving a man he barely knew.

A STRANGER'S FAVORITE SONG moves between a marriage that ended in silence rather than in shouting, a house in Mirdamad that stopped being a retreat and became the only place left, and the long, one-sided last months that followed — months measured out in Friday phone calls, voice messages, a housekeeper's hand holding up a phone, and a silence that slowly replaced a voice. Between the grief chapters sit others: a massage parlour on Westwood Boulevard visited out of pure stubborn devotion, a father's operatic fury over a badly parked car, a joke about grandchildren that turned out, in the end, to have been entirely true.

It is a novella about the particular ache of losing someone twice — once to forgetting, and once to death — and about the strange, late mercy of understanding a father only after you have caught yourself becoming him.

A book of the Chronicle.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began with a simple, uncomfortable question: how well do we actually know the people we love most, once we strip away the assumption that closeness and knowledge are the same thing? Many of us could sit at a parent's memorial and be asked their favourite song, their favourite meal, their favourite place in the world — and come up empty, not for lack of love, but for lack of the specific, unglamorous conversations that never felt urgent until there was no longer any time left to have them.

The book is also an attempt to sit honestly with a harder question: what does grief look like when the person you are mourning had already lost so much of himself before his body finally followed? And what does it look like when you could not go — when the country he died in is one you are not able to enter, and the whole of the ending reaches you through a telephone held up by somebody else's hand? Is it betrayal to feel relief when the waiting ends? I don't think so. I think relief and grief are frequently the same weather system, arriving from different directions at once, and that pretending otherwise only isolates the people going through it.

Alzheimer's appears here as a kind of speculative fiction within the fiction — an attempt, offered humbly and without any claim to authority, to imagine what time and self might feel like from the inside of a mind that is quietly coming apart. No one can know this for certain. I hope the attempt is more useful than the silence would have been.

Finally: I don't think you can really understand your own parents until you have caught yourself doing the thing they did. Not the good things. The other one — the silence across a table from a person you love, the not-saying, the going somewhere in your own head while somebody waits. That understanding often arrives too late to use on the actual relationship. This book is, in part, about what to do with it anyway.

Chew Z

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CHAPTER ONE

[PRESENT]

I had put on the same dark suit I own for exactly this purpose — weddings on one end of its life, funerals on the other, nothing in between that seemed to require it — and stood in front of the mirror longer than the task warranted, the way you do when you are not actually checking your appearance so much as delaying the moment you have to walk out the door and become the son everyone is about to need you to be. She adjusted my collar without being asked, a small unnecessary correction that felt, that morning, like the only thing anyone had done for me in days that wasn't a condolence.

The tea had gone cold in front of everyone at once, as if the room had agreed on it without speaking.

I sat where I had been placed — the good chair, the one nearest the photograph, the one reserved for a son — and let the condolences move past me like weather. God rest him. He was a good man. He is at peace now. The words arrived in the same order from every mouth, in two languages, and I nodded at each of them with the same tilt of the head, and somewhere behind my sternum a small animal was pacing.

I want to be exact about where this was, because the exactness is the whole of it. It was not Tehran. It was a rented hall behind a Persian restaurant in Irvine, California, on a Sunday afternoon in February, with too much fluorescent light for the occasion and folding chairs that had clearly been used for weddings as often as funerals, the same stackable chairs pressed into service for whatever life happened to be asking of them that week. My father had been buried six days earlier, in Tehran, in the morning, next to his mother, and I had watched it on a telephone propped against a cup. My brother had watched it on the same telephone, from the same sofa, having driven the forty minutes to sit on it. Neither of us could go. The reasons are two other books long and a pair of hands long and, in Amir's case, his own, and I am not going to make this book carry them.

So my aunts did what the women of that family have always done, which is build a room around a thing nobody could bear. Farah booked the hall. Shirin ordered the food. Someone had put out too much of it, which felt correct, which felt like the one detail in the entire afternoon that would have met with his approval.

The photograph on the easel beside my chair was the one my mother had chosen and sent from Tehran — a decent one, taken by some cousin at a wedding years back, my father caught mid-sentence, one hand slightly raised as if making a point about the rice, which, knowing him, he very well might have been. It was a good photograph. It did not look like a man who had spent his last months disappearing by degrees. It looked like someone about to tell you something at length, whether you had asked or not, and I found myself staring at it throughout the afternoon the way you stare at a door you expect to open.

* * *

It was my aunt Farah who asked the first question, and she asked it kindly, the way you'd ask a child to recite something he'd surely been taught.

"What was his favourite song, azizam? We should play it. For the room."

I opened my mouth. Nothing arrived to fill it.

I thought of the car, decades back, my father's hand on the dial, always moving, never landing. I thought of the radio left on in every room of every place he ever slept, for company more than for listening. I could not, if the hall had been on fire and the answer the only water, have named one song my father loved enough to ask for twice.

"I'm not sure," I said. "He liked — he had the radio on a lot. I don't think he had one song."

Farah's face did the thing faces do when they are deciding whether to press. She let it go. She patted my knee instead, which was worse.

It was Mr Rostami who asked the second one, an hour later, holding a plate of dates he had not touched. He was a retired man from three doors down from my aunt's, who had known my father only in California, only in the years my father spent there, and who had, I gathered, spent a great many afternoons with him in a lawn chair in my aunt's garden discussing the moral collapse of everything.

"Kamran loved his food. Everyone knew this. What was his favourite dish? My wife will make it, in his memory, next Friday."

And I, thirty-seven years old, a man who builds rooms for a living in which strangers are told exactly what to feel and in what order, discovered that I did not know my father's favourite dish either. I knew that my father ate constantly, joyfully, without apparent discrimination — kebab from the stall, his mother's stew on the holidays, whatever the delivery boy brought at eleven at night when he couldn't sleep, a foam container of something from a strip mall in Westwood eaten standing up in a car park with total seriousness. I knew my father loved the act of eating the way other men love a sport. I did not know which team.

"He liked everything," I said, which was true, and which was also a way of saying I don't know, dressed for company.

The third question I saw coming from across the room, the way you see a wave a half-second before it reaches you, and there was nothing to do but let it reach me. It was Amir, my own brother, four years older and therefore — in the particular arithmetic of Iranian sons — somehow always more forgiven for not knowing things. He crouched by my chair and said, low, just for me:

"Was there a place he loved? For the — you know. When people ask where to go, to remember him. A place."

I looked at my brother's face, which had our father's eyebrows and our mother's mouth, and felt something in my chest do a slow, complete turn, like a key finding the wrong lock.

"I don't know, Amir," I said. "I don't think he went anywhere. I think he just — stayed."

My brother nodded, as if this were an answer, and it was, though not the kind either of us could use for a plaque or a programme or a toast. It was the truest thing either of us had said all day, and it explained absolutely nothing, and it was going to have to be enough, because it was all we had.

* * *

I sat with my cold tea until the room emptied into its cars, and thought: I have his eyebrows. I have, apparently, his temper, according to the woman who adjusted my collar. I have fifteen years of Fridays and Saturdays and voice messages that said call when you can in a voice that got thinner every year. And I could not tell one stranger, in the week we buried him, what song he would have wanted playing while we did it.

Outside, the light was doing the ordinary, indecent thing light does on days like this in Southern California — arriving gold and generous over a car park, over a row of minivans, over nothing that had asked for it.

She found me by the car and didn't ask what was wrong, which I have come, in the four years we have been doing this, to understand as its own kind of gift — the not-asking, the willingness to simply stand next to a person until whatever is happening in them finishes happening. "You didn't have to have an answer," she said eventually, which was kind, and which also wasn't true, not in the way that mattered. I hadn't needed an answer for Farah, or for Mr Rostami, or even really for Amir. I had needed the answer for myself, for some private accounting I hadn't known I was keeping until the questions arrived and found the ledger empty.

I thought, not for the first time and not for the last: what do you do with a grief for a man you loved completely and knew barely at all? There is no ritual for that particular shape. You just sit in the good chair, in the wrong country, and let people ask you questions, and discover the size of the silence where the answers should have been.

CHAPTER TWO

[BEFORE]

I wasn't there for any of this, which means everything in this chapter comes to me secondhand — from three photographs, a handful of my mother's stories told at the exact same pace every time she told them, and a kind of guessing I've allowed myself because a son is entitled to imagine his father young at least once.

Before any of that, before my mother, there was a version of my father I know even less about — a boy from a house in the south of the city whose father repaired sewing machines and whose mother ran a kitchen like a small, fierce general, and who was clever in the specific brutal way that country used to reward. He got into Sharif, and the universities closed under him for three years, and he married my mother in the middle of that closure, and came out an engineer the year the war ended, already a father twice over and already, for five years, on my grandfather's payroll, putting lifts into a city that was throwing up towers faster than it could staff them, and somewhere in those years he built himself, the way you build anything — an accent from the north, a collar, a way of standing in a room — so completely that by the time I was old enough to notice, there was no seam in it anywhere.

In the photographs he is thin. This is the first thing that surprises me every time I look at them, because the man I knew filled a doorway the way a good meal fills a plate — generously, a little over the edge. But in the photographs he is thin and dark-haired and wearing a shirt with a collar so wide it looks like it is trying to fly off his shoulders, and he is looking at my mother the way men in old photographs are not supposed to look — not posed, not aware of the camera at all, looking at her like she was the only interesting thing that had ever happened in that room.

My mother says they met at her cousin's engagement party, where he had not been invited and had come anyway, on the arm of a colleague of a colleague, because — and she always laughs here, every single time, forty years of laughing at the same joke — "your father could smell a party with good food in it from two neighbourhoods away."

He asked her to dance twice. She said no twice. The third time he didn't ask. He simply appeared next to her with two plates of food he'd assembled from the buffet like he was building something structural, and said, "You haven't eaten. A woman who hasn't eaten cannot be trusted to make good decisions, like refusing to dance with me," and handed her a plate, and she took it, and that — she says, and I believe her, because it is the single most him thing I have ever heard — was the whole courtship, more or less. He fed her into liking him.

There was a second act to this story that my mother only told me once, late, on a night when she'd had enough wine to let the guard down a little. He had asked her, three weeks after the engagement party, to marry him — not on one knee, not with a ring he could afford yet, but standing outside her father's gate in Elahieh at an hour a young man from the south had no business standing outside anyone's gate in the north, holding a single stem of jasmine he had apparently taken from a neighbour's wall on the walk over, uninvited and unashamed about it. "I don't have anything to offer you yet," he told her, "except that I will never once let you go hungry, and I think that might be worth more than people give it credit for." My mother says she laughed at him. She said yes anyway, before the laugh had even finished, which she describes now as the only decision in her entire life she made faster than she should have and would still make again.

* * *

My grandfather's reaction to the engagement, as best I can reconstruct it, was somewhere between amusement and calculation. Yousef was a man who had founded a company out of nothing and spent thirty years making it into something that put up half the towers in the north of the city, and he looked at the thin engineer at his gate the way he looked at everything, which was as a problem with a solution in it. The solution was a job. My father went to work for my grandfather's firm within the year, putting lifts into the buildings my grandfather's firm was putting up, and I have come to understand, much too late, that this was the first gift my

father ever accepted from that family and the last thing he ever took from anyone without paying for it twice.

My grandmother came around the way the women in both families apparently always did, by way of the kitchen — but it was my father's mother, Katayoun, who administered the only exam that family ever actually gave anyone. She invited my mother to the house in Mirdamad and tested her not on suitability but on appetite, on whether she'd take a second helping without being asked twice. My mother, who was an art historian and had been raised in a house with a Steinway nobody played, took the second helping. She still describes it as the most important examination she ever passed.

The wedding itself, by my mother's account, was small and slightly chaotic in the specific way weddings are when one family has money and the other has a mother who will not be told how to cook. My mother remembers my father being nearly an hour late to his own ceremony, having stopped, en route, to resolve some dispute at the caterer's over a shortage of rice that he had personally appointed himself to fix, arriving finally with his collar crooked and an explanation that somehow left everyone laughing instead of angry, which she says was the moment she understood, fully and for the first time, exactly what she'd agreed to marry. "I married a man who couldn't walk past a kitchen with a problem in it," she told me once. "I just didn't know yet that it would eventually become the only kind of problem he was willing to walk toward."

I try to picture it and I can. That part is easy. The part I have never been able to picture, no matter how many times my mother tells it, is what he sounded like when he was trying. I know what he sounded like defeated — thin-voiced, over a phone line, forty years later, saying call when you can like it cost him something. I know what he sounded like furious — I have that recording permanently, somewhere in the part of the brain that keeps such things, a specific pitch reserved for parking attendants and slow waiters and the men who ran the car park at my aunt Shirin's condominium in Irvine. But I have no recording, no memory, no photograph that captures sound, of what he sounded like courting. I have had to

build it myself, out of the shape of the story, and in my private reconstruction he sounds like a much younger, much luckier version of the man who used to laugh so hard at his own jokes — with no sound, shoulders going, that was how he laughed — that he'd have to put his fork down.

* * *

For a few years, by every account I have gathered, they were happy in the plain, undocumented way people were happy before everyone carried a camera in their pocket to prove it. There are no professional photographs of this part. There is my father, standing outside a rented apartment with a bag of pistachios the size of a pillow, mid-laugh at something my mother said, caught by a neighbour's borrowed camera. There is my mother, pregnant with Amir, sitting on a step, squinting into sun, my father's hand visible at the edge of the frame, resting on her shoulder like he'd forgotten to take it away.

He was, in this period, by every account, a man who liked his life. He liked the little apartment. He liked being newly a husband. He apparently liked, with a passion my mother describes as "genuinely a little insane," any meal eaten outside the house, on the theory — his own, stated often, according to her — that "food cooked by someone who is paid to care about it tastes like they care about it, and food cooked out of duty tastes like duty." He would say this to his own mother's face, at her own table in Mirdamad, and she would swat him with a spoon, and he would eat two more helpings to make up for the insult, and everyone would laugh, and this — this specific triangle of insult, spoon, second helping — apparently happened at nearly every meal for years, and never once stopped being funny to any of them.

There is one more story from this period my mother tells that I've never quite known what to do with. In the second year of the marriage, before either of us existed, my father spent an entire month's wages — money that should have gone toward the deposit on a better flat — on a used record player he found in a shop window, for no reason my mother could ever get out of him beyond

“a house should have music in it, even if we don’t.” They owned exactly four records between them, borrowed mostly, and my mother says he’d play the same two sides on Friday mornings, cooking eggs badly and singing along even worse, entirely unconcerned with how he sounded, until the neighbour upstairs began banging a broom handle on his floor as a form of protest. My father took the broom handle, my mother says, as a compliment — proof the music was loud enough to matter to somebody. I have never been able to find out what was on those four records. My mother doesn’t remember, or says she doesn’t, and the record player did not survive the move to Elahieh, where there was a Steinway to stand in its place that nobody ever played, and so this is one more entry in the long list of things about my father that exist only as the outline of a story, with the actual content missing.

* * *

I did not know this man. I want to be careful and say that plainly, here, in the middle of writing him as if I did. The man in these stories — quick, hungry, funny, reckless enough to stand at a rich man’s gate with a stolen flower — is not a man I ever once met. By the time I was old enough to form memory, he had already started the long, slow business of becoming someone else, and I have spent most of my life assuming that quieter, heavier man was simply who my father was, the way you assume a house has always looked the way it looks the day you’re born into it, never wondering what stood on the lot before.

It turns out a whole different man stood there first. I only found him after he was already gone, going through the photographs my mother scanned and sent me one at a time over a fortnight because she could not bear to send them all at once, sitting on the floor of an apartment in Los Angeles while the woman I live with slept in the next room, looking at a thin man in a wide collar laughing so hard he’d had to put his fork down, thinking: I would have liked you. I think I would have liked you very much. I’m sorry I only got the ending.

CHAPTER THREE

[INTERIOR I]

A note on these sections: no one can know what this was like from the inside. What follows is speculation — Ali's, and mine — offered not as fact but as the only kind of understanding available when the person who could confirm or deny it is no longer able to answer. These chapters grow stranger as the book goes on.

The kitchen smells like his mother's hands.

He is lying somewhere — a bed, a good bed, a bed with rails on it that he does not need to check for because his hands have found them already — and the smell arrives before anything else does, the way it always has, saffron and browning onion and the particular hot-metal smell of a pot lid lifted too soon, and for a moment this is simply Tuesday, or some Tuesday, one of many, and he is young enough that being called to the table still feels like an event worth having opinions about.

He is aware, distantly, of a voice. It has been talking for a while. It has a shape he recognises the way you recognise a song from only its opening note — familiar, warm, belonging to him in some way he can't currently name — but the words are arriving slightly out of order, or perhaps he is simply choosing, without deciding to, which ones to keep. Baba. He keeps that one. It sits in his chest like a coal, warm, wanted, though whose baba, and in relation to what, has slipped somewhere just behind him, the way a word sits on the tip of the tongue and then, mercifully, stops mattering.

He would like to answer the voice. He opens something — not his mouth, exactly, more the intention of a mouth — and what comes out, if anything comes out, he cannot hear from in here. It doesn't feel like failure. That's the strange part, the part he would tell someone if there were a someone left inside to do the telling: it doesn't feel like loss from this side. From this side it feels like being extremely, wonderfully warm, lying in a room that smells correct, waiting for a meal that his mother — whose hands these clearly are, whose kitchen this clearly is, two rooms away with the door open — will call him to any moment now.

Somewhere outside this room, if there is an outside, a second voice is saying something with worry folded into it, saying his name in the stretched-out way that means are you there, can you hear me, and some old reflex, some structure built decades before any of this, wants to reach for it, wants to say yes, of course, where else would I be, and for one full second the reaching almost works, almost surfaces, a hand nearly breaking a still pond —

and then the smell of saffron gets stronger, mercifully, and he lets it pull him back down, because it is Tuesday, and he is young, and any moment now his mother is going to call him to the table, and there is nowhere in this warm small forever that he would rather be.

CHAPTER FOUR

[BEFORE]

This one I remember in pieces, which is worse, in some ways, than not remembering it at all. A reconstruction has the mercy of being someone else's story. A piece is undeniably yours, and you're left holding it not knowing what it's a piece of.

I have said in another book that I was loved, enormously and obviously, by everybody in that apartment, and I am not going to take a word of it back. I want to put down the other thing beside it, because the two of them lived in the same eight rooms for the whole of my childhood and neither one ever cancelled the other.

My parents did not fight. I want to be exact about this because people hear "unhappy marriage" and reach for a picture of raised voices and slammed doors, and there were none. What there was, instead, was silence — a specific, respectful, terrible silence that could settle over the dinner table on the eighth floor of a building in Elahieh and stay there for the whole of a meal, with the radio on low in the kitchen and the Steinway closed in the corner and nobody being anything other than perfectly polite. My father would pass my mother a dish. My mother would say thank you. And underneath the thank-you there was a gravity, a weight in the air of the room, that a child cannot name and cannot fail to feel, and that

I spent years mistaking for the ordinary weather of a household because I had never lived in any other.

I remember it best as a sound, or the absence of one. I remember being six or seven and sitting between them on a Friday afternoon with a plate in front of me, listening to the clink of a spoon against a bowl, and the refrigerator, and a car going past on the street eight floors down, and understanding — with the strange practical calm of a child — that the quiet had edges, and that I was inside it, and that the polite thing was not to mention that I was.

They were calm. They were courteous. They were, in the specific phrase my mother would later use about it, “very civilised with each other,” and I have come to believe that this was the worst of it — that a shout would have been an admission that there was something worth shouting about, and neither of them would give the other that.

* * *

I asked her once, an adult asking an adult, on the phone, from a kitchen in Los Angeles, whether she had been unhappy the whole time.

She was quiet long enough that I understood the quiet was the answer. Then she said, “I loved him. He loved me. Those were never the problem, Ali jan. The problem was that neither of us could find the door out of the room we were sitting in, and after a while you stop looking for it and just arrange the furniture.”

She told me, on that same call, one more thing I’ve turned over many times since — that it was never about money, though my grandfather’s money sat in the middle of that apartment like a fifth person at every meal, and it was never about another woman or another man, and it was never, in thirty years, about anything either of them could have pointed to. “He had something in him,” she said. “Some room he couldn’t let anybody into. Not me, not you boys, not his own mother. He’d go into it in the middle of a sentence. And I’d sit there, across the table, and wait, and after a while I stopped waiting, and after a while longer he stopped noticing that I’d stopped.”

I think about that description more than I probably should, because I recognise, in myself, occasionally, the same architecture — the sense of a room in the middle of the house that nobody else is allowed into, and the suspicion, inherited from somewhere, that going into it in the middle of a sentence is simply what a man does.

* * *

The marriage ended the spring I was twenty-three, and I was not there for that either.

I was in Van Nuys, in a studio with a window that faced a wall, two years into a country where nobody knew whose son I was, and my mother called on a Friday afternoon, from the kitchen in Elahieh, and said it in a completely level voice, the way she has said every enormous thing she has ever said to me. "Your father and I are going to stop. We've talked about it. It's decided. He's going to take a place of his own." And then, after a pause in which I could hear the refrigerator, the same refrigerator, eleven thousand kilometres away: "Are you eating?"

There was no shouting at the end either. That should not have surprised me and it did. My father packed. That is the whole of what happened, in the physical sense: a man of fifty-two put his shirts and his radio into two suitcases and left an apartment he had lived in for more than twenty years and had never, in any sense that a lawyer would recognise, owned, because the apartment was my mother's, and had come to her through her father, the way most of what stood in that household had come. He took nothing that wasn't his. My mother said afterwards that she had told him to take anything he wanted and that he had looked at her as if she had suggested he take the walls.

The same month, he left the firm. My grandfather's firm, the one he had gone to work for at twenty-three with a stolen jasmine stem still, in some sense, in his hand. Nobody asked him to. He simply did not go back after the papers were signed, and when my grandfather — who was eighty-one and would be dead within two years, of a pneumonia that took him in nine days — sent word that the job was his for as long as he wanted it, my father sent word

back that he was grateful, and did not go. I understand this now as the most complete sentence my father ever spoke. He would not stay in the house. He would not stay in the job. He had accepted one gift from that family at twenty-three and he had spent twenty-nine years paying for it, and he was not going to go on paying for it after the reason had gone.

He never worked again. Not properly. Not in anything I could have named to a stranger. He was fifty-two, an engineer who had put lifts into half the towers in the north of the city, and something in him, from that month forward, simply stopped reaching past the front gate of wherever he happened to be sleeping. I used to think this was grief doing what grief does, temporarily. I did not understand, until much later, that it was the beginning of a permanent arrangement.

* * *

Here is the part that nobody outside our family has ever believed, and I have stopped trying to make them.

They kept talking.

Not occasionally. Not at weddings. Every day. My father, from wherever he was — a rented room in Tehran that was never an address so much as a place to keep a suitcase between flights, or a lawn chair in my aunt's garden in Irvine, or, later, the house in Mirdamad — sent my mother messages. Dozens a day. Hundreds, some days, she told me, holding the phone up to the camera once so I could see the scroll of them, an entire afternoon of a man's thoughts arriving in a woman's kitchen one line at a time: a thing he had eaten, a thing on the radio, a complaint about a grocer, a question about her knee, a photograph of a plate. And she answered. Not all of them. Enough.

"He always said he loved me," she told me, years after, without any weight on it at all. "He said it in the messages. He said it on the phone. And I'd say, Kamran, I know, and I'd mean it, and then I'd ask him whether he'd taken his sugar pills, because what else is there to do with a man like that."

"Did you love him?" I asked her, because I was thirty-four and had earned it.

"Of course I loved him," my mother said. "I still do. That was never the problem. I told you what the problem was."

I don't know what my father understood about any of this while it was happening. I have never once heard his side, not from him — he did not discuss it, ever, not with me, not with Amir, not in the years I might have thought to ask before it was too late to ask him anything at all — and so this whole chapter, like the last one, is built from someone else's memory of him, which means the one person whose interior experience this chapter is actually about is the one person who never gets to speak in it. That should probably bother me more than it does. Mostly it just makes me tired, the same specific tired my mother described, the tiredness of trying to hold a shape that keeps being described to you by everyone except the person who lived it.

I was seven, or eight, the last time I remember the three of us in a room together being entirely easy — a birthday, mine, I think, or close to it — and my father brought too much food, the way he always did, plates and plates of it, more than any child's party required, and my mother let him, and for one afternoon nobody in that room was waiting for anybody. I did not know, eating cake off a paper plate, that I was watching something at its fullest. I have gone back to that afternoon more times than I can count, trying to find the exact moment the quiet came in, and I have never found it, because it didn't come in at a moment. It came the way water finally gets through — slowly, over years, so that one day you simply notice there is no wall left, and two people sitting very politely on either side of where it stood.

CHAPTER FIVE

[PRESENT]

It took my mother forty minutes to clear my father's room, and I watched all forty of them on a telephone, the week after the memorial.

I want to put down how that worked, because I think people who have not done it imagine it as simpler, or crueller, than it actually was. Neither of his sons could get into the country. My aunts could have gone, and would have, and my mother said no — said it in the level voice, on a call the day after the memorial — because she was there, and she had a key, and because, she said, “I lived with that man’s things for thirty years, Ali jan, I know which drawer he’d have kept anything in.” So she went to Mirdamad with Fatemeh khanom, who had kept that house for my grandmother for twenty years and had kept my father alive in it for two, and she propped her phone against a stack of his shirts on the bed, and she went through the room while I sat on the floor of my own kitchen in Los Angeles at six in the morning and watched.

Half of the forty minutes was her standing still in the doorway, waiting for there to be more.

There wasn’t more. This was the thing she kept discovering, over and over, opening drawers like each one might correct the last one’s disappointment, and turning to the camera each time with the same small tilt of the head. A man lives sixty-five years and the room he dies in holds four shirts, two pairs of trousers gone soft at the knee, a pair of reading glasses with one arm reinforced by tape gone amber with age, a blood pressure cuff, a glucose meter with its little lancets in a plastic case, four prescription bottles with names I now know better than I know most poems, and a small wooden box of my grandmother’s — not his, hers, inherited rather than accumulated — containing a string of worn prayer beads and a single photograph of a woman I have only ever known old, young, laughing at something outside the frame.

That was the whole inventory. I want to be exact about this because I think the exactness is the point: no letters. No journal. No box of ticket stubs, no drawer of photographs he’d taken himself, because he had never really taken any — the family album, such as it is, exists almost entirely because other people occasionally remembered to point a camera at him. No favourite book with a spine cracked in one particular place from being reread. No cassette, no record, no evidence of a song. My mother went

through everything twice, the second time slower, telling me she'd missed something, and what she found the second time was the same nothing, just more thoroughly confirmed.

* * *

Tucked behind the prescription bottles, in the back of the top drawer, she did find one more thing on the second pass that she'd missed the first time — a folded paper receipt, gone soft and nearly transparent with age, and she unfolded it and held it up to the camera and said, "This is yours, I think," and I made her hold it closer, and it was from a Persian restaurant in Tarzana, California, and it was dated the twenty-second of May, 2015.

I know that date. I know exactly what evening it belonged to, because it was the evening of the day I graduated, and my father had driven up from Irvine in a car that was not his and sat in a stadium in the San Fernando Valley for four hours in a jacket, and afterwards the three of us ate in a booth in Tarzana with a telephone propped against the sugar so my mother could watch from a kitchen in Elahieh at nine in the morning her time, and my father had insisted on paying and had made a performance of the bill that my brother still does at parties.

There was no note on it, nothing written in any margin, nothing to indicate why it had been kept when literally nothing else had. I sat there for a long time on the floor of my kitchen looking at a piece of paper on a screen, and my mother, who is not stupid, did not say anything, and let me have it.

I have decided, in the months since, to believe it mattered — that somewhere in that eleven-year-old evening was a meal good enough, or a table full enough, that some small, wordless part of him wanted proof it had happened, even if the rest of him never once mentioned it to anyone. My mother put it in the wooden box with the beads and the photograph. It felt, of everything in that room, like the single object closest to an actual answer to the questions I hadn't been able to answer at the memorial, even though it told me nothing at all — not the dish, not whether he'd

enjoyed it. Just that an evening had occurred, once, in a country he only ever visited, worth this much preservation by accident.

* * *

There was a radio. I should say that, because it felt, for a moment, like it might be the answer — a small clock radio on the nightstand, the kind that has been in every version of every room he ever slept in as long as I can remember, in Elahieh and in Irvine and in Mirdamad. My mother turned it on, absurdly, because I asked her to, as if it would tell me something, as if the last station he'd left it on would be a message. It was set to nothing in particular. Static and a sports call-in show, a stranger arguing about a match, and I sat on a kitchen floor eleven thousand kilometres away listening to a dead man's radio playing a stranger's opinion about a game he had probably never once cared about, and I laughed, once, badly, the kind of laugh that's really a different thing wearing a laugh's clothes.

My mother sat on the edge of the bed for a while after that. Long enough that the light in the room changed colour on my screen without either of us noticing it happening.

I keep coming back to something a friend said to me once, about a different loss, years ago — that grief is partly the work of sorting a person's things into keep and let go, and that the sorting itself is a kind of mercy, because it gives your hands something honest to do while the rest of you catches up. I had been almost looking forward to that, I think, in the ugly, practical corner of the mind that plans logistics even during catastrophe, until it became clear that my hands were not going to be allowed anywhere near it. I had pictured myself holding some object of his — a watch, a pen, a specific shirt — turning it over, deciding it mattered, keeping it.

There was nothing to sort. Nothing sat in the keep pile because there was, essentially, no pile. My mother put the wooden box in her bag, with the beads and the photograph and the receipt, and said, "This is yours. I'll keep it until," and did not finish the sentence, because neither of us knows what the until is, and I understood, watching her zip the bag, that I wasn't being handed a

piece of my father. I was being handed a piece of his mother, because it was the only object in that entire room that had clearly, undeniably, been loved by somebody once.

* * *

He had, somewhere in the last fourteen years, become a man who did not accumulate. Not sentimentally, not materially, not in any direction I could find. He ate his meals outside the house and left no restaurant receipts, except one. He wore his clothes until they gave out and did not replace them with anything that expressed a preference. He watched a television that was, as far as I could tell, never once tuned by him to something he'd chosen, only ever left running, company more than entertainment. Somewhere in the wreckage of the marriage and the leaving of the firm and the years in his sisters' spare rooms and the return to his mother's house and the slow years after her death, he had apparently made a decision — not announced, not discussed, maybe not even conscious — to want less and less, on purpose or not, until there was almost nothing left in the room to prove he'd wanted anything at all.

I sat with the phone in my hand and thought about the dervishes, the ones you see spinning in the old films, arms out, one palm up and one down, and how the whole point of the turning, as I understood it, was to arrive eventually at nothing — no possessions, no attachments, nothing left to carry into whatever comes after. I don't think my father was trying to become a mystic. I think he was just tired, in a specific, un-noble way that has nothing to do with enlightenment, and tired people stop collecting things because collecting requires believing there will be a future in which the thing matters.

She came into the kitchen while my mother was still on the screen, and stood behind me, and looked at the four shirts on the bed, and did not say anything until my mother had said goodbye. Then she said something I've kept with me since: "Maybe that's not emptiness. Maybe that's just a man who'd already given away everything that could be given, a long time before this room." I didn't know, at the time, whether I believed her. I think I believe

her more now, months later, than I did sitting on that floor with the evidence of his absence on a screen the size of my hand.

But it looked, from where I was sitting, almost the same. A room emptied down to almost nothing. A man who left this world exactly as unencumbered as the ones who spend a lifetime trying to arrive there on purpose.

My mother turned off the radio mid-argument, and picked up the phone, and did not point it back into the room again before she closed the door, because there was, at that point, genuinely nothing left in it to look at.

CHAPTER SIX

[BEFORE]

My grandmother's house had a smell that met you at the gate, before you'd even crossed the little courtyard off the street in Mirdamad — onion browning slow, always slow, because she believed anything browned quickly was being disrespected — and under that, rosewater, and under that, something mineral and old that I have never smelled anywhere since and would not be able to name if my life depended on it. I think it was just the smell of a house that had been lived in by one family for forty years without interruption. Some houses smell like that. Most don't get the chance.

Katayoun was a small, imprecise, ferociously exact woman — imprecise in the sense that she never once measured an ingredient in her life, exact in the sense that the food came out the same, to the mouth, every single time. She ran that kitchen the way some women run companies, and my father, her only son, was both her favourite employee and her favourite critic, and their entire relationship, as far as I ever witnessed it, was conducted through food and insult in roughly equal measure. He would tell her the rice was slightly overcooked. She would tell him he'd said the same thing every week for thirty years and had somehow, in thirty years, never once refused a second plate. He would take the second plate to prove her wrong about something, though I was never clear on what.

She had buried her husband — my grandfather Abbas, who had come up from the south of the city with her when my father was a boy and never once, in the north, stopped being a man from the south — the year I turned nine, after two years of a disappearing that nobody in that family ever once gave its name. I was nine and I stopped speaking for six weeks, which is another book, and my grandmother, who was sixty-two and had just watched her husband forget her face, did not stop doing anything. She cooked. That was her answer to it. She cooked for the seventh day and the fortieth and for every Friday after, and she narrated the market to anyone in earshot the moment she returned from it — which vendor had tried to shortchange her, which one had given her an extra handful of herbs “because he knows I have grandsons to feed,” which tomatoes were an insult to the very idea of a tomato. My father inherited this narrating impulse whole, unmodified, down to the cadence, and I understood only much later, hearing him complain about a grocer on a Friday phone call decades after, that I wasn’t hearing my father’s voice so much as hers, still running, still complaining, carried forward inside him like a second heartbeat.

I have one particular holiday memory of that house that I return to often, more than any single photograph — a Nowruz gathering when I was perhaps ten, the whole extended family crowded into rooms that were never designed to hold that many people at once, my grandmother directing the chaos from the kitchen like a small, fierce general, my father running food out to the table in relays, my mother sitting where she had been placed with a plate she did not want and a smile she had decided on in the car, everyone talking over everyone else in the specific joyful noise that only happens when a family briefly forgets to be careful with each other. I remember my father, that night, pulling me aside near the end of the evening, slightly out of breath from carrying dishes, and saying, with an intensity that surprised me even then, “This is the whole thing, you understand? This right here. Everything else is just waiting for this.” I did not understand what he meant at ten years old. I understand it now as close to a thesis statement for his entire life — that the noise and crowding and excess of that one house, on that one night, was the fullest expression he ever found of what he

wanted from the world, and that everything after her death was, in some sense, an ongoing failure to recreate a room that could no longer exist without her in it.

This was the table where the spoon-swatting happened, the same story from a few chapters back, and I want to say plainly here what I only understood much later: that table was the last place my father was ever fully, unguardedly himself in front of other people. Not with my mother, not with me, not with anyone he met afterwards in any country. Only there, only with her, only over food that had been “disrespected” by being browned too quickly.

* * *

He went back to her the autumn I was thirty-three.

He had spent the better part of a decade by then being a man without an address — a room in Tehran, a spare bedroom in Irvine, a suitcase that was never fully unpacked in either — and my grandmother was eighty-six and had begun, the way old bodies do, to fail slowly, nothing anyone could name as a single illness, just a gradual, cumulative tiredness that took a little more of her every season, until the woman who had run that kitchen for fifty years could no longer stand at her own stove for more than a few minutes at a time. And my father, who was in California that summer, in his sister’s garden, in a lawn chair, arguing with Mr Rostami about the price of melons, got on a plane in October and went home to Mirdamad, and did not come back.

He did not send her anywhere. I want to say this plainly, because I think it is the single most important fact in this entire chapter: he did not hire a nurse, did not move her to a facility, did not so much as ask Farah or Shirin to fly over and share the load in any sustained way, though both of them offered and one of them came, for a month, and was sent home. He simply became her nurse, in addition to being her son, without ever once discussing that this was what he was doing.

He fed her, in the end, by hand — small spoonfuls of the same soups she’d taught him to make, sitting on the edge of her bed for what Fatemeh khanom told my mother were sometimes hours at a

stretch, patient in a way none of us had ever seen him be with anyone else, patient in a way I don't think he had it in him to be with a wife, or with his own sons on our more difficult days, or with himself. He read to her, in the evenings, from newspapers she could no longer focus on herself, narrating the world back to her the same way she'd once narrated the market to him. He slept, for the better part of her last year, in a chair pulled up beside her bed rather than in his own room down the hall, close enough to hear if her breathing changed in the night.

I did not witness any of this. I want that on the record, because a man who builds rooms for a living in which strangers are made to feel they were present at something has to be careful about the difference. I was in Los Angeles. I knew it from Friday phone calls in which he said almost nothing about it — “she’s the same, she ate, don’t ask me about it” — and from my mother, who went to that house more often in those two years than she had in the previous twenty, and who told me, in the level voice, that my father tended to his mother with a devotion that bordered on the total erasure of himself. I have thought, many times since, about the particular cruelty and mercy both folded into that fact: that the one person he ever nursed with his whole undivided attention was his mother, in her final year, in the same house where he himself would spend his own final months being nursed by a housekeeper, and an ex-wife, and two sons on a telephone. He gave her exactly what, two years later, he would not receive back — not because anyone failed him, but because geography and circumstance and a pair of hands had rearranged themselves in the intervening years into something none of us could undo from where we stood.

She died on an ordinary evening in October, in her own bed, in the room she had slept in since my father was a boy, with my father sitting beside her holding her hand, her breathing simply slowing and then stopping over the course of an hour that he described to me only once, on the phone, weeks afterwards, in one of the only unguarded sentences I ever got out of him about any of this: “She looked like she was deciding something. Not afraid. Deciding.” There was no final crisis, no ambulance, no argument about what more could be done. There was only a son who had spent two years

making himself entirely available to one long goodbye, and a mother who, having buried a husband and outlasted almost everyone she had ever cooked for, got to leave the world in the one room and the one set of arms she'd have chosen if anyone had thought to ask her.

She was eighty-eight. I want the number here, because it is the only kind of fact about that death that I actually possess.

* * *

I did not fly back for the burial, because I could not, and I remember almost nothing about the week after except that I did not know what to say on the phone to a grown man standing in his dead mother's kitchen, and said nothing, and regretted the nothing for years afterwards without ever finding the sentence that should have filled it. Fatemeh khanom told my mother that he stood in that kitchen on the third or fourth day holding one of her spice tins, not doing anything with it, just holding it, turning it slowly in his hands the way you'd hold something you were afraid of dropping and also afraid of setting down.

He did not change anything. Not the following week, not the following year, not ever, as far as I could tell from the video calls in which Fatemeh khanom occasionally, at my request, turned the phone around and walked it through the house. Her room stayed her room. Her spice tins stayed in the order she'd kept them, an order that made sense to no one but her and that he preserved anyway, as if rearranging them would be a second death on top of the first. The chair she'd always sat in stayed empty and occupied at the same time, the way certain chairs do in certain houses, everyone unconsciously leaving it alone at dinner even when there were guests and not enough seats. The chair beside her bed, the one he'd slept in for a year, stayed pulled up close to the mattress for the rest of his life, as if some part of him was still keeping the vigil long after there was no one left to keep it for.

I think, if I'm honest, that this is the chapter where he actually died — not the one at the end of this book, but this one, quietly, two years earlier, in a way that took the rest of his life to finish arriving.

The marriage had already taken something from him, but a marriage ending, however politely, still leaves you technically free to go build something else somewhere else, and for a decade he had at least gone back and forth across an ocean pretending that he might. His mother's death, and the two years of devotion that preceded it, took the last argument he had for going anywhere. The house in Mirdamad had been the place he retreated to when everything else was gone. Once she was gone too, the house stopped being a retreat and became, simply, the only place left, because it was the only place where enough of her remained that leaving would have felt like abandoning her twice — and because he had spent two years pouring every remaining ounce of himself into keeping her comfortable in that specific set of rooms, which meant the rooms themselves had absorbed something of that devotion and would not easily let it go.

The sorrow that moved into that house after she died never really moved back out. I don't say this as a figure of speech. I mean that in the calls afterwards there was a particular quality to the air in certain rooms — her bedroom especially, but the kitchen too, and the chair by the window where she used to sit — a heaviness I could see on a screen, that had nothing to do with dust or disuse and everything to do with a grief that had simply never been given anywhere else to go. He did not talk about her often. He did not need to. The house talked about her constantly, in the arrangement of tins, in the chair no one sat in, in the particular slow, careful way he still, two years later, entered her old room, as if the door itself required a kind of respect he extended to nothing else in his life.

He got quieter after that. Not overnight — I want to be careful not to make this sound like a single dramatic year — but steadily, the way a room gets darker as the sun goes down, so gradually that you can be sitting in it the whole time and only notice the dark once you try to read something and can't.

He stopped, around then, doing things that had nothing to do with anyone else's convenience. He'd always liked outside food, but now the taking of a meal outside the house became less an appetite than an errand — somewhere to go that required no explanation, no

company, no risk of a conversation heavier than ordering. He kept the radio on, always, in every room, at a volume too low to actually listen to, which I understand now, and did not understand then, as a man arranging the sound of other voices around himself so the silence of the house would have something to compete with.

And I called less than I should have, in those years. I told myself it was the time difference, and work, and the ordinary momentum of a life being built somewhere else. Some of that was true. Some of it, if I'm honest in the way this book keeps demanding I be honest, was that a call to him in that house had started to feel like a call to a museum where the one exhibit still breathing was quietly, patiently, waiting to join the rest of the collection.

CHAPTER SEVEN

[BEFORE — HUMOUR]

This is one of the only chapters in this book I don't have to reconstruct from anyone else's memory. I was there. Amir was there. It remains, to this day, the single funniest afternoon of my adult life, and I make no apology for putting a chapter like this in a book about grief, because he would have been furious with me if I hadn't.

It started because my father had, somewhere in his early fifties, in the first of the years he spent going back and forth between a room in Tehran and his sisters' spare bedrooms in Irvine, developed an almost religious devotion to a massage parlour in a strip mall on Westwood Boulevard — a cramped, over-lit storefront between a pharmacy and a place that sold saffron by the gram, with a laminated price list taped to the window and a curtain instead of a door for the back room, run by a heavyset, no-nonsense woman from Rasht named Parvin who had, according to my father, "hands like a wrestler and the patience of a saint, which is the only correct combination for this work." He went weekly, whenever he was in the country, which meant a seventy-minute drive up the 405 in my aunt's car for a forty-minute massage. He spoke of Parvin the way other men speak of a favourite football team — total loyalty, occasional public complaint, no possibility of switching allegiance.

The walk from the car park was itself a small performance, and I want to include it because Amir and I still, to this day, occasionally re-enact it for each other unprompted. Our father set a pace that was somehow both leisurely and urgent, stopping twice to greet shopkeepers by name, once to critique a display of fruit outside the grocer's that he had no intention of buying ("who arranges melons like this, an animal?"), and once, memorably, to have a fully separate argument with a man selling roasted corn from a cart about whether the corn had been sitting too long, an argument that ended, as they nearly all did, with my father buying two ears anyway and eating them both before we'd even reached Parvin's door.

Parvin's shop itself deserves its own small description, because it was, in its way, as much a monument to my father's particular tastes as the kebab stalls or the bakery ever were. The front room held two plastic chairs, a low table stacked with outdated Persian magazines nobody read, and a hand-lettered price list that Parvin updated herself in a marker that had clearly been rewritten over the same cardboard so many times the old prices ghosted through beneath the new ones. There was a small radio behind the counter, always on, always tuned to the same Persian station from Encino that my father kept on in every room of my aunt's house, and I remember noticing, the first time we visited, that this alone might explain years of loyalty better than any massage technique could — that he had found, in a strip mall in Westwood, one more room that sounded exactly like home.

* * *

Amir had come from Toronto that spring for four nights, the second of only two times we saw each other in eleven years, and our father had driven up from Irvine for two of them, and treated the overlap like a holiday, and on the second day he announced, over breakfast, with the tone of a man conferring an honour, that he was taking us to Parvin's.

We should have been suspicious of his enthusiasm. We were not.

The back room, it turned out, had exactly one table. My father had not mentioned this. What this meant, practically, was that Amir and I sat on two plastic chairs against the wall, drinking bitter tea from paper cups, while our father went first, “since I made the introduction,” and Parvin worked on him behind a curtain thin enough that we could hear absolutely everything and see, through a gap where the fabric didn’t quite meet the wall, an alarming quantity of him.

He narrated the entire massage. Not to us — to Parvin, at volume, as though she were a colleague he was training rather than a professional he was paying. “There. There, exactly, don’t be shy about it, my mother used to hit harder than that with a spoon and I survived.” Parvin, who I would come to understand had heard every version of this speech for years, did not slow down or speed up or acknowledge the review in any way, which somehow made it funnier, the two of them locked in a routine so old it had stopped requiring either party to actually respond to the other.

At some point — Amir swears it was eleven minutes in, I maintain it was closer to fifteen, this remains a genuine unresolved dispute between us — our father began to snore. Loudly. Mid-instruction. He had been in the process of telling Parvin that his left shoulder “held all his regrets” when the sentence simply stopped, replaced by a snore so enormous and unselfconscious that Amir had to put his paper cup down before he spilled it laughing, and Parvin, without missing a beat, without so much as glancing toward us, said, through the curtain, in the flattest voice I have ever heard a human being produce, “He does this every week. I am used to it now. He wakes up insulted regardless of what I have done.”

He did wake up insulted. He woke, roughly twenty minutes later, sat halfway up on the table, looked around as if trying to locate the exact person responsible, and announced, to no one and everyone, “Zahremar! Why did nobody wake me, I came here for a massage, not a coma” — and then, without any transition at all, accused Parvin of having gone soft on his shoulder specifically because he’d fallen asleep and couldn’t defend it, refused to pay the listed price because he claimed the nap portion of the session should be

discounted, negotiated for what felt like a genuinely unreasonable length of time over what amounted to less than the cost of a modest lunch, in a country where nobody negotiates, lost the negotiation completely, as he always did, and then — as he always did — tipped Parvin nearly double the difference on his way out, muttering something about her hands and her patience, loud enough that she'd hear it, quiet enough that he could pretend, if asked, that he hadn't meant her to.

Amir went next. I went last. By the time it was my turn, Parvin had clearly decided that the entire family shared whatever affliction had produced my father, and treated me with the specific gentleness people reserve for someone they've already forgiven in advance for something they haven't done yet. She took my right hand, at one point, and turned it over, and looked at the palm, and looked at me, and said nothing about it at all, and went back to work, and I have loved her for that ever since. She asked, halfway through, without any particular emotion in her voice, whether we were "always like this," and I said yes, and she nodded slowly, as if this confirmed a theory she'd been developing over the better part of seven years, and did not say another word.

* * *

Afterwards, walking back to the car, my father in front, one hand pressed theatrically to the shoulder that "held all his regrets," complaining the whole way that Parvin had "definitely gone soft on purpose, out of spite, because I fell asleep and she took it personally" — Amir looked at me and mouthed, silently, over our father's head: he tipped her double. And I mouthed back, because it was true and because it was the whole of him in one sentence: of course he did.

I think about that walk more than almost anything else from those years. Not because it was important. Because it wasn't. It was small, and loud, and slightly ridiculous, and utterly, recognisably him — a man who would negotiate you down to nothing and then quietly overpay out of some private accounting system only he understood, who would insult a service he loved so completely he

drove seventy minutes each way for it, who fell asleep mid-complaint and considered the complaint unfinished business rather than let sleep have the last word.

I did not know, walking to the car that day, laughing at my brother's silent joke behind our father's back, that I was collecting one of the only afternoons I would ever be able to answer for, later, when someone asked me what he was like. Not his favourite song. Not his favourite food, though God knows I could have answered that one too, eventually, if anyone had ever asked me about outside food and given me an hour. But this — a man narrating his own massage to a woman who'd stopped listening years ago, snoring through his own complaint, overpaying to make up for a fight he'd started and lost on purpose. If someone had asked me that day at the memorial what he was like, instead of what he liked, I would have had an answer ready in half a second.

Nobody asked me that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

[INTERIOR II]

There is a phone ringing, or there was, or there will be — the order of things has stopped being something he can rely on, the way you can no longer rely on a floor once you know it might, at any point, simply not be there.

A face is on the other side of it. He knows the face is a good face, a face that belongs to him in the particular way certain faces do, the way a hand belongs to an arm without needing to be introduced to it. The face is saying something with its mouth shaped around news, around a word that might be moved or might be a name or might be remember — they have started, lately, to sound almost the same to him, three shapes of hope aimed in his direction, and he receives the hope even when the specific cargo of it slides off him like water off something no longer able to hold water.

He would like to say the correct thing back. There is, somewhere behind where his voice used to live, an old and enormous willingness to be pleased for whatever this is — a woman's name, a

flat with light in it, a room with a wall of names on it that strangers will stand in front of for four minutes — and the willingness is real, the willingness is possibly the last fully intact thing in the whole structure, but it has nowhere left to go. It sits in his chest and glows and cannot get out through the door that used to be his mouth, because the door, lately, only opens onto other rooms — his mother's kitchen, a spoon, a curtain with a gap in it, a woman's laugh from a photograph he does not remember being shown but somehow already knows.

Two faces are folding into each other now, the way steam folds into more steam. One of them is small and frowning and standing in a doorway in a thin jacket in Esfand, refusing a coat. One of them is older, holding a phone toward him like an offering, with the same frown. He cannot, if his life depended on it — and in some sense it does, in some sense this is exactly what his life now depends on — locate the line between them. He is not frightened by this. That is the part no one watching from outside could possibly guess: from in here, the folding doesn't feel like losing anyone. It feels like everyone finally being close enough to touch at once.

Somewhere, underneath everything, a radio he cannot remember is turned to a station he cannot name, arguing quietly about a game whose rules he no longer needs. He lets it hold the silence for him, the way it always has, the way it was always, without his ever once explaining it to anyone, doing exactly that job.

The face on the phone says his name. It says it twice, slowly, stretched a little long at the end, the way he used to say the boy's, buying himself a second — though which of them is doing the buying, now, and which is the boy, he could not say, and it doesn't matter half as much as the fact that it is being said at all, that somewhere, still, someone is saying his name like it's worth the extra second.

He cannot answer. He is fairly sure, in the dim mechanical way he is sure of anything now, that something in his face is trying to. He hopes, in the last language he has left for hoping, that this is somehow enough. That the trying shows.

CHAPTER NINE

[BEFORE]

I left the spring I was twenty-one, at ten past four in the morning, from an airport where nobody in my family was crying, and I have written elsewhere about the queue and the bag and the man who came to see me off with bread in a plastic bag, and I am not going to write it again. My father was not at the airport. I want to be careful about how that is read, because there is a version of this book in which that is a cruelty and it was not one. He had said goodbye the night before, in the apartment, at the door, with one hand raised, not waving so much as simply held up, as if checking the weather, and had then gone into his room and shut the door, and my mother had looked at the door and then at me and said nothing, and I understood that this was the arrangement, and that the arrangement was the best he had.

My father did not ask me to stay. I used to think this meant he didn't mind. It took me a long time to understand it might have meant the opposite — that a man who had spent nearly three decades sitting in a polite silence across a table from a woman he loved had developed a policy, somewhere along the way, of never asking anyone for anything he suspected they might refuse.

The country he stayed in was not one I could go back to. I won't turn this book into a history lesson about why — that isn't the story I'm telling, and he would have hated me turning his last years into a current-events segment, and the private part of the reason lives in two other books and in the way my right hand closes — but I'll say plainly that from the day I landed in Los Angeles there was no version of a plane ticket in the other direction that ended with me leaving again on schedule, and that everyone in my family knew it, and that nobody ever once said it at a dinner table. She asked me once, early, gently, whether it was really true, whether there was really no way, and I remember not having a clean answer, because the true answer was something like: there is always a way, and every one of them ends in a room I have already been in once.

So the distance was not a thing we managed. It was a thing we lived inside, all of us, from the first week.

* * *

And then, two years in, the marriage ended, and my father did the thing that nobody in the family had predicted, which was that he came to me.

Not to live. He could not have lived with me; I had a studio in Van Nuys with a window that faced a wall, and then a one-bedroom in Frogtown with a lemon tree that belonged to the building, and there was never, in any of the places I have rented in this country, a second room. He came to his sisters. Farah and Shirin had been in Orange County since before I could walk, a house and a condominium ten minutes apart in a part of Irvine where every third mailbox has a name I could pronounce, and my father — who had a blue passport in a drawer from a decade earlier that he had never once used for anything but a stamp — got on a plane the summer after the divorce and came and stayed in Farah's spare room for four months. And then went back. And then came again, in the spring, for five. And then went back.

That was the rhythm of the next nine years. Months at a time in a lawn chair in Irvine, and then months at a time in a rented room in Tehran that he described so little that I could not have drawn it for you, and the ocean in between, crossed and recrossed by a man who had, as far as I could tell, no particular reason to be on either side of it except that his sons were on one and his mother was on the other.

I drove down most Sundays when he was here. Seventy minutes on the 405 in a car I had owned for four months and then a car I had owned for four years. I would find him in the garden, in the same chair, with the radio on the table beside him tuned to the station from Encino, and a plate of something on his knee, and Mr Rostami from three doors down in the other chair, and the two of them would be in the middle of an argument about the moral collapse of the neighbourhood that had, I gathered, been running continuously since the previous Sunday. He would look up when I came through

the gate and say, "Ah. The engineer," which was a joke, because I was not one and he was, and then he would tell me to sit down, and ask me if I had eaten, and not wait for the answer.

I want to put down what those Sundays were actually like, because there is a version of a divorced father in a spare room that gets told and it is either pathos or comedy and mine was neither. It was a man of fifty-five, and then sixty, in a garden in Southern California with a plate of fruit, in a country whose language he spoke well enough to insult a parking attendant and not well enough to make a friend, being visited by a son who lived in a city forty miles away and could not fit him in it. We did not talk about the divorce. We did not talk about my mother, except that he would ask, every Sunday, whether I had spoken to her, and I would say yes, and he would nod, and that was the whole of it. We did not talk about the job he had walked away from or the fact that he had not, in the years since, found another one. We talked about food. We talked about the radio. We talked, at enormous length, about the parking situation at my aunt Shirin's complex, where he slept when Farah's spare room was taken, which he regarded as a standing indictment of the moral character of the state of California.

And every Sunday, when I left, he would walk me to the gate, and stand there with one hand raised, the way he had stood at the door in Elahieh, and I would drive back up the 405 in the dark and feel the specific thing you feel when you have spent four hours with a person you love and said nothing to him that either of you will remember.

* * *

So we settled, without ever deciding to, into the rhythm that would define the last decade and a half of his life: a call most Fridays, sometimes Saturdays, always roughly the same shape, and a lawn chair in Irvine for a few months a year. Did you eat. How is work. Is it cold there. Have you spoken to your mother. Send a picture of the flat.

The calls rarely ran longer than ten minutes, and I used to feel a little guilty about that, as though love should require more

sustained attention than a ten-minute check-in could provide. I understand it differently now. Ten minutes, every single Friday, for fifteen years, adds up to something much larger than any single long conversation could have been — it adds up to a kind of scaffolding, a structure you don't notice holding anything up until it's gone. He would ask the same four or five questions in roughly the same order nearly every time, and I used to find this repetitive in a mildly irritating way, the way any ritual can feel irritating when you're young enough to still believe rituals are optional. I did not yet understand that the repetition was the entire point — that he wasn't asking because he'd forgotten the answers from the week before, but because asking was how he touched the distance between us, the way you might run your hand along a wall in the dark, not to learn anything new about the wall, just to confirm it was still there.

Somewhere inside that rhythm, for the last four years of it, there lived one running joke he never once let die, and he brought it out nearly every single call like it was fresh material every time: the woman I live with, and the years I had apparently spent failing to marry her. "Three years," he'd say, the way other men might announce a batting average, and then, the following winter, "Four. Four years, and you still haven't asked her. What are you waiting for, a written invitation from God himself? I could be dead by the time you get around to it" — and then, immediately, delighted with his own darkness, he'd laugh at his own line before I could even react to it, with no sound, shoulders going, which on a video call from Mirdamad meant the whole picture shook. "Cheshmam roshan," he'd add sometimes, which means, more or less, my eyes are brightened — a phrase people use sincerely when good news arrives, and which he used entirely sarcastically, the way you'd say "wonderful" about something that was very much not wonderful yet. "I want grandchildren," he'd say, most calls, some version of it. "Your brother gave me one and she answers me in English. You're taking your time on purpose, I think, just to torture an old man." I would tell him, every time, that we'd get there, that there was no rush, and he would make a sound of theatrical despair, as if I'd just confirmed his worst fears about the entire younger generation, and

then ask what I'd eaten for lunch, subject closed, until the following Friday, when he'd open it again like it had never once been closed at all.

I used to find this mildly exhausting, the way you find any joke exhausting on its four hundredth telling. I did not understand, then, that he meant every word of it completely, underneath the performance — that the joke was the only shape he had available for a want that large, and that dressing it as a bit was simply how a man like him kept a real hope from sounding like a real hope, in case the real hope didn't come true in time.

* * *

He was not, by nature or by choice, a man of pictures. I want to say this clearly because I think people who didn't know him assume, now, that there must be some trove somewhere — a phone full of family photos, a saved folder of video calls — and there isn't, not really. He'd pose for one photograph a year if pressed, always the same expression, half-cooperating, and then hand the phone back like he'd done you a favour he didn't fully understand the point of. Video calls made him visibly uncomfortable in a way I never got to the bottom of; he'd hold the phone too close or too far, ask "can you see me" four times in a single call, and seem relieved when it ended.

What I have instead — what I will have, now, for the rest of my life, in place of a father — is voice messages. Dozens of them, saved without any real system, sent at odd hours because he never fully adjusted to the time difference in either direction and didn't seem to think it mattered. Some are thirty seconds. Some run four or five minutes, him talking through some minor frustration about a neighbour or a delivery or the price of something, his voice doing the thing it always did when he was truly comfortable — sliding into a kind of run-on grumbling that required no response, because it wasn't really a question, it was company, the audio version of the radio he kept on in every room.

I did not know, sending back a thirty-second reply between meetings, in the years when he was still fully himself, that I was

building the only archive I would ever have of him. If I had known, I think I would have asked him more. I think I would have asked him, directly, on one of those ordinary Friday calls, what song he'd want played at the end of things, and he would have laughed at me for asking something so morbid, and made a joke instead, and I would have let him, because that was easier for both of us, and because neither of us believed, on any of those ordinary Fridays, that there was a deadline attached to the question.

There wasn't supposed to be a deadline. That's the part I keep returning to. We had got so used to the rhythm of the calls that the rhythm itself started to feel like a kind of permanence — as if a relationship conducted entirely in thirty-second increments, across a distance neither of us could close from my side, might simply go on that way forever, a low, steady hum in the background of two separate lives, requiring nothing further from either of us but the next Friday.

CHAPTER TEN

[BEFORE — HUMOUR]

Not everything from those years was distance and static. Some of it was food, always food, and some of it was rage — his rage, specifically, a magnificent, disproportionate, entirely theatrical rage that could be summoned by almost nothing and burned itself out almost as fast as it arrived, leaving behind no residue except a story his sons would still be telling each other for the rest of their lives.

On the food: he had, by his sixties, refined his devotion to eating outside the house into something closer to a personal cosmology. There were, in his accounting, exactly three trustworthy kebab stalls in the whole of Mirdamad, and he could tell you, unprompted, at length, on a Friday phone call, precisely why the fourth one — the one everyone else seemed to like — was a fraud. "They rush the fire," he told me once, with the gravity of a man delivering a verdict in a murder trial. "You cannot rush the fire. The fire knows if you rush it, and it takes its revenge on you later, in your stomach, at three in the morning." He ordered, always, more than any single

person could eat, on the stated theory that “a good meal deserves witnesses, even if the witnesses are just what’s left on the plate tomorrow,” and he would eat the leftovers the next day with the same ceremony as the original meal, sometimes greater ceremony, as if the dish had improved overnight through sheer patience. That he was a diabetic, and had been told so by three doctors on two continents, entered into this cosmology only as a kind of weather — something to be complained about, never something to be obeyed.

There was a stretch of about two years, after his mother died, when he became intensely obsessed with a bakery in the south of the city — in the neighbourhood where he had been born and where his own father had repaired sewing machines for forty years — that sold a particular kind of bread he claimed, with no evidence I was ever able to verify, my grandfather Abbas had loved above all other breads. He would take a bus — an actual bus, forty minutes south, a genuine inconvenience for a man who otherwise organised his entire life around minimising inconvenience — twice a week, specifically for this bread, and would return with far more of it than any household of one could reasonably consume, and would then complain, without fail, on the phone, that the bakery had “changed something, I don’t know what, but it’s not the same as last week,” and would go back anyway the following Tuesday to check again. Amir once asked him, reasonably, on a three-way call, why he kept going if it disappointed him every time. My father looked at the phone like the question itself was the disappointing thing, and said, “Because it might be right this time,” and that, Amir still says, is as close as our father ever came to a personal philosophy, delivered entirely by accident, about a loaf of bread.

* * *

The rage was a different art form entirely, and it required almost no provocation. Amir still tells the story — better than I do, admittedly, because he was in the car and I was too small to be anywhere but the back seat — of the Great Parking Incident, in which our father spent nearly twenty minutes circling the same three streets in Elahieh, growing steadily, audibly furious at a stranger’s car parked “at an angle only a criminal would choose,”

muttering “bi-fahm” — roughly, this person has no sense — under his breath every time he passed it again, a car that was, by any reasonable measure, parked perfectly normally, slightly crooked at most, and which our father nonetheless treated as a personal referendum on the moral collapse of the entire neighbourhood. He did not confront the car’s owner. He never once, in any version of this story I’ve heard, actually did anything about the source of his fury. He simply circled, and narrated, and circled, building an entire case in his head against a stranger who would never know the trial had taken place, and then, having found parking eventually, walked into the apartment and asked what was for dinner in a completely normal, entirely recovered voice, as if the last twenty minutes had happened to somebody else.

This was, more or less, the shape of every outburst, in every country. Something small — a delivery five minutes late, a television remote with a dead battery he insisted was “sabotage,” a grocer on Westwood who’d apparently shortchanged him by an amount neither Amir nor I could ever get him to specify — would ignite him completely, briefly, gloriously, and then vanish almost as fast as it arrived, leaving him calm, occasionally even cheerful, while the rest of us were still catching our breath from the performance.

One entry from “Baba’s Grievances” that Amir and I still quote to each other, word for word, involved an entire afternoon in Irvine he spent convinced that a new neighbour in my aunt Shirin’s complex was deliberately timing their laundry to interfere with his afternoon nap, based on evidence that amounted to the sound of a washing machine occurring, on two separate occasions, within an hour of when he usually lay down. He drafted, in his head, an entire imagined confrontation with this neighbour, rehearsed portions of it out loud to me over a Sunday lunch, refined the wording of his complaint — in a language he did not speak well enough to deliver it in — over the course of several days, and then, when he finally encountered the neighbour by chance in the car park, said nothing at all beyond a polite nod, and came back in vaguely disappointed in himself for having missed the opportunity, already beginning to

draft, my aunt said, an even better version of the speech for next time.

* * *

I used to find this exhausting, when I was younger and living under his roof and unable to simply leave the room when the weather turned. I understand it differently now, from a distance both geographic and temporal — now that I have, myself, discovered the particular fury a man can summon over a dropped glass or a missed exit on the 110, a fury that has nothing to do with the glass or the exit and everything to do with some older, unrelated pressure finally finding a small enough door to escape through. I think his rages were never really about parking, or remotes, or grocers. I think they were the pressure of an entire unlived life — the marriage he sat inside for thirty years without a word, the firm he walked away from, the ocean he crossed and recrossed for nine years without ever landing on either side of it, the house he went back to and never left — finding, every so often, some tiny, safe, ridiculous reason to let a little steam out before sealing itself back up again.

Amir and I, for years, kept a private, uncharitable, deeply affectionate list of “Baba’s Grievances,” updated after every visit and every three-way call, and I still have it, in a message thread between us that runs from a phone I owned in 2013 to the one in my pocket now, a running joke that has quietly become one of the only documents I possess that captures him exactly as he was — not the sad ending, not the silence at the end of the phone, but a man circling a parking spot for twenty minutes over a crime that existed only in his own furious, loving, endlessly particular imagination.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

[PRESENT]

She was thirty seconds into a sentence the first time I understood something about my father that I had spent thirty years failing to understand from the outside.

I should say, before anything else in this chapter, the thing that sits underneath all of it: my father did not get his wish. I did not marry her, not in the four years he counted against me on every call, and there is no child, and by the time either of those things might have happened, he was already too far into the illness to be told in any way that meant what it should have meant, and then too far gone to be told anything at all, and then gone entirely — which means the man who had spent four years threatening, joking, half-serious and fully serious at once, that he might die before he got to hold a grandchild of mine, turned out to have been telling the exact and literal truth of what would happen, dressed the whole time as a joke so the truth of it wouldn't have to be looked at directly. There is no photograph of him holding anyone's child but his own, and those are nearly forty years old, and in them he is thin.

This is not that chapter. I want to be honest about that, because a book like this one usually has that chapter — the son becomes a father and understands — and I have read those books and I believe them and they are not available to me. What I have instead is smaller and, I think, worse.

* * *

It was a Tuesday evening in the apartment in Frogtown, about a month after the memorial, and she was telling me something about her day. Nothing that mattered. A colleague, a thing that had gone wrong with a delivery, the kind of thing people tell each other at the end of a day not because it is interesting but because it is theirs and they want to hand it to somebody.

And I went somewhere.

I want to describe it exactly, because I have spent my adult life describing rooms for a living and this is the only room I have ever found myself in without having built it. I was sitting across a table from a woman I love, with a plate in front of me, and the radio on low in the kitchen, and she was talking, and at some point in the middle of her sentence I was no longer there. Not thinking about anything. Not upset. Simply absent, gone into some interior room in the middle of my own head with the door pulled quietly to behind

me, while my face went on doing whatever a face does when it is being polite.

And she stopped talking. And waited. And after a while — I could not tell you how long, which is the point — she said, gently, with no weight on it at all: “You went somewhere.”

And I said, “Sorry. I’m here.”

And she said, “I know. You always come back. It’s just that I never know how long to wait.”

* * *

I sat there with the plate in front of me and the radio going and something in my chest turned over so completely that I had to put my fork down.

Because I knew that sentence. I had never heard it before in my life and I knew it, the way you know a smell — from the inside, before language. My mother had said it to me, about him, on the phone, three years ago, from a kitchen in Elahieh, in the level voice: he’d go into it in the middle of a sentence, and I’d sit there across the table and wait, and after a while I stopped waiting.

I had spent years — quietly, mostly without saying so out loud, even to myself — building a private case against him. Why didn’t he fight for the marriage. Why didn’t he say the thing, whatever the thing was, to the woman he sent three hundred messages a day for fourteen years. Why did he sit in that silence for three decades and let it become the weather of the house we grew up in. Why didn’t he leave the house in Mirdamad after his mother died, why didn’t he call more, ask more, want more, for himself and from me. I had built this case the way you build a case against anyone you love and don’t understand: from the outside, using only the evidence of what he did and didn’t do, with none of the evidence of what it had cost him to do or not do it.

And here I was, at thirty-seven, in a country I had chosen, in a life I had built with my own two hands out of nothing, sitting across a table from the one person in the world I had let all the way in, doing it. Doing exactly it. Going into a room in the middle of a

sentence and pulling the door to and leaving somebody on the other side of it to decide how long to wait.

I had not learned it from him. That is the part I need to be careful about. Nobody taught me the room. It was simply there, the way a house has a room in it that nobody uses, and I had lived in it for thirty-seven years without once noticing that it was the same room, in the same place, with the same door, as the one my father had disappeared into across every dinner table of my childhood while my mother passed him a dish and said thank you.

* * *

This does not excuse anything. I want to be careful here, because I think it would be easy, and false, to turn this chapter into a tidy forgiveness — now that I have caught myself doing it, I understand, and so I forgive. It wasn't that clean. I still believe he could have fought harder. I still believe he let the silence win more territory than it should have been allowed, in that apartment and in that marriage and in that house. Recognising the room did not hand me an excuse on his behalf.

There was a second moment, weeks later, that sharpened this rather than resolved it. She had gone to bed and I was standing in the kitchen at midnight with the radio on low, and I noticed that I had been standing there for some time, and that I had turned the radio on without deciding to, and that the volume was set at exactly the level at which you cannot actually hear what is being said, only that something is — and I stood very still with my hand on the counter and understood that I was not listening to the radio. I was arranging the sound of other voices around myself so that the silence of the apartment would have something to compete with. I had watched him do it in every room he ever slept in, on two continents, for thirty years, and had found it mildly eccentric, and I had never once, until that midnight, asked what the silence was that needed competing with.

What it handed me, instead of forgiveness, was a question I had never once thought to ask, in all the years I still had access to him to ask it: not why didn't you do more, but what was it like in there?

What did it feel like, sitting at that table, in the middle of a sentence, with the door pulled to and a woman on the other side of it deciding how long to wait, and no way — no vocabulary, no permission, no door — to tell her that you had not gone anywhere on purpose, that you were in there wanting to come out, that the wanting was possibly the last intact thing in the whole structure? I will never get to ask him that question. I understand, now, standing in my own dark kitchen with my hand on the counter and the radio murmuring about nothing, that I am the only one left who will ever be able to guess at the answer, and that the guessing is going to have to serve as the conversation we never had.

I turned the radio off. I stood there a while longer anyway, in the actual silence, because some other part of me — some very old part, I think, some part that had been waiting thirty years for exactly this — needed a few more minutes in that kitchen, understanding, finally, far too late to do anything useful with it, a man I had spent my whole life almost knowing.

Then I went in and woke her up, and told her that when I go somewhere, she should not wait, she should say my name, and that I would come. It is the only instruction I have ever been able to give anyone about the room. I do not know whether my father ever had it to give. I think, if he had, he would have given it to my mother thirty years ago, and this would be a different book, and I would be a different man, and I would not be writing this in the dark.

CHAPTER TWELVE

[BEFORE]

The call came on a Tuesday, which I remember only because I have since developed an irrational distrust of Tuesdays, the way some people distrust a particular street corner after something happens there once.

It was my mother, and she did the thing we'd both learned to do over years of long-distance bad news, which is to say the small true fact first, plainly, before either of us could dress it up into something softer. "Your father fell," she said. "In the bathroom. He's all right. He's not all right. Fatemeh khanom found him."

And then she told me how, in the level voice, in the order it had happened, because she knows that I build rooms for a living and cannot bear to be given the second wall first.

Fatemeh khanom had come in the morning, the way she came every morning, with the key she had had for twenty years, and the house door had been locked from the inside with the chain on, which it never was, because he never used the chain. She had knocked. She had rung. She had stood in the courtyard and called his name through the door in the stretched-out way that means are you there, can you hear me, for what she told my mother was ten minutes and was probably four. And then she had gone and got the neighbour and his son, and the two of them had put a shoulder to the door until the chain came out of the frame, and she had gone through the house calling his name, and found him on the floor of the bathroom, between the toilet and the wall, where he had been since some hour of the night that nobody would ever establish, in his own piss, with his glasses under the sink and one arm at an angle that was wrong, entirely conscious, and — this is the detail my mother gave me last, and that I have thought about more than any other — apologising. To Fatemeh khanom. For the state of the floor.

I was sitting at my desk in Frogtown when she told me this, with a plan of a room on the screen in front of me, and I did not feel the thing I expected to feel. I had imagined, in whatever idle way you imagine bad news before it arrives, that a call like this would land as a single blow. Instead it landed the way water finds a crack — quietly, almost gently, and then didn't stop, spreading backwards through months of Friday calls I now had to look at differently. The balance he'd lost, once, twice, on the stairs, that he'd mentioned as a joke about the stairs. The sugar readings he had stopped reporting because I had stopped asking. The story about the grocer he'd told me twice in the same call, each time as if it were new. The morning he couldn't find the word for "kettle" and covered it, with impressive speed, by simply pointing the phone at it and saying "that thing, you know the thing," and none of us had thought much of it, because everyone forgets a word sometimes, because we had

all, without meaning to, been quietly editing the early evidence into something explainable.

* * *

Amir called me an hour later, from his own kitchen forty minutes away, because my mother had called him second and he had needed the hour. He asked what I wanted to do. This is the question that distance turns into its own particular cruelty — not “what do you feel,” but “what do you want to do,” as if feeling and doing could be cleanly separated when you are the son sitting eleven thousand kilometres and one closed border away from the person you love. I did not have a good answer. Neither did he. We had, instead, the beginning of a permanent, low-grade calculation that would run under every decision either of us made for the rest of our father’s life: how much can we actually do from here, how much is our mother carrying that we are not, how much of our absence is genuinely unavoidable and how much of it is a story we are telling ourselves so we don’t have to look directly at the unavoidable parts.

We agreed, that day, on the practical things — money, sent through a cousin, for a woman to come in the afternoons as well as the mornings; a doctor; a schedule of calls neither of us fully believed we could keep. We did not discuss, because there is no efficient way to discuss it over a phone call already crowded with logistics, the actual shape of what was coming.

He fell again in November. This time the hip went. There was an operation, in a hospital in the north of the city that my mother went to every day for eleven days and described to me, at my request, in a detail that I have since wished I had not asked for — the corridor, the ward, the specific way my father lay in the bed with his good hand on top of the blanket as if he were holding it down. He did not recover from it well. Men of sixty-five with his sugar and his weight and his heart do not, as a rule, and the doctors said so, gently, in the register doctors use when the news is also the prognosis. He came home in December to the house in Mirdamad and to a hospital bed that my mother had bought — I want that on the

record, plainly: the woman he had divorced fourteen years earlier went to a medical supply shop on Vali Asr and bought her ex-husband the bed he was going to die in, and had it delivered, and had it put in his mother's old room, because that was the room with the window — and he did not, from the day he was carried into that bed, get out of it again on his own feet.

* * *

My mother told me, weeks later, what the neurologist's office had actually been like, since it was she who had taken him, in a wheelchair, in a taxi, before the second fall. She described a small waiting room with the same generic posters you'd find anywhere in the world, and my father sitting very upright in the chair, dressed, she said, more formally than the appointment required, as if he'd decided that whatever was about to be said to him deserved a collar and pressed trousers. When the doctor explained, gently, what the tests suggested — the word for it, the one you are thinking of, the one his own father had spent two years disappearing into while nobody in the family said it aloud — my father had listened without interrupting, genuinely rare for him, my mother pointed out, a man who interrupted waiters mid-sentence to correct their pronunciation of a dish, and had then asked exactly one question, which was not about prognosis or treatment or timeline, but "Will I still know my mother's kitchen?" The doctor, my mother said, hadn't had a ready answer for that one, and my father had nodded once, as if the lack of an answer was itself the answer, and asked when they could be done so he could go and find something to eat.

I called him myself the week of the appointment. He was, that day, entirely himself — sharp, mildly annoyed about something at the pharmacy, uninterested in discussing his own diagnosis beyond a brief, dismissive wave of a sentence: "The doctors like to give things names. It doesn't change what I'm having for lunch." And then, because he could not help himself, because the sarcasm was the last organ in him to fail: "Cheshmam roshan. First the sugar, then the arm, now the head. I'm collecting them. Tell your brother I'll have the full set by spring." I let him have that. I laughed,

because it was funny, because he was funny, right up until the end, in a way that made me laugh so hard on that call that I had to put the phone face-down on the desk. I understood, even then, that this might be the last version of the conversation where he got to decide how much weight the subject was allowed to carry, and I was not going to be the one who took that small remaining control away from him.

I hung up and sat with the phone in my hand for a long time afterwards, in an apartment on the other side of the world, doing the same arithmetic I would keep doing for months: how many good Fridays are left, and how would I know, in advance, which one was going to turn out to be the last one where he still fully knew who was calling.

* * *

I called my mother that same night, mostly because I didn't know who else to call, and because some old habit still ran toward her first whenever something in my life felt larger than I could hold alone. She was quiet for a long moment after I told her what he'd said about the full set, and then she laughed, once, and then she said something that has stayed with me since, delivered without any bitterness at all, in the tone of someone stating a fact rather than settling a score: "I left him so that the silence wouldn't be the thing that finished both of us. I never wanted this for him. Not this. I'd have taken thirty more years of the quiet over this."

I understood, hearing her say it, that whatever complicated grief she carried about the marriage had never once curdled into wanting him harmed, and that this — her plain, uncomplicated sorrow for a man she had stopped living with and never stopped loving — told me something about both of them that no amount of my own reconstruction ever could.

"Are you eating?" she said then, in the other voice, the practical one. "Properly. Not the bread and the cheese."

I said yes.

She said: "I don't believe you."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

[INTERIOR III]

There are faces now. There is no longer any reliable way to attach names to them, which is not, from in here, the same catastrophe it would look like from outside.

A face with worry folded into the corners of its mouth appears often. It says a word that might be his name, in a voice pitched to carry across some distance he cannot measure — not a room's distance, something larger, something involving machines and wires he does not remember agreeing to. He does not know this face's name. He knows, with a certainty that has survived everything else, that this face is not a stranger. Some faces arrive pre-loved, the way certain rooms arrive pre-warmed, and this is one of them, and he rests in the feeling of it the way you'd rest against a wall you trust without needing to know who built it.

Time has stopped behaving like a line. It behaves, now, more like water finding whatever container is nearest — sometimes a kitchen forty years gone, sometimes a curtain with a gap in it and a woman's voice complaining cheerfully about a shoulder, sometimes a lawn chair and the smell of cut grass and a man three doors down being wrong about melons, sometimes nothing at all, no scene, just a temperature and a texture, warm and soft, the specific grey-gold of afternoon light through fabric he cannot name but has apparently always trusted.

A second face arrives, and this one is older than the others, and it is the only one of the loved ones that has ever been here in the room and not on the glass. It sits on the edge of the bed. It has a hand that it puts on the blanket, flat, and leaves there. It says things in a level voice, about a bed, about a window, about whether he has eaten, and he knows — the way you know the shape of your own house in the dark — that he has answered this voice ten thousand times, that there was a whole life in which this was the voice he answered before any other, that there was a table and a dish passed across it and a thank-you, and something under the thank-you that he had never once found the word for. He would like to find it now. He has, he thinks, been sending it to her, one line at

a time, for years, and it has never once been the word. The face waits. It is very good at waiting. It has, he understands dimly, been waiting for him since before either of them was old.

He cannot answer it. He is not sure, some days, that there is a fully assembled him left to do the answering. But something old and stubborn in the wiring still turns, faintly, toward the sound, the way a plant turns toward a window it cannot see, only feel.

He is not lonely in here, exactly, though loneliness might be the word someone outside would reach for, watching him. It's closer to being extremely far underwater — pressure instead of absence, muffling instead of emptiness, everything arriving late and soft-edged, nothing arriving with the sharp specific pain of a life fully lost, because a life fully lost requires knowing, moment to moment, exactly what shape it used to be, and that particular knowledge, mercifully or cruelly or both at once, is the first thing that left.

The face with the flat hand is still there. He lets the sound of it wash over him the way the radio always did, a warm current of a voice standing between him and whatever silence would otherwise be there. It has always, he thinks, or almost thinks, been doing exactly that job.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

[BEFORE]

By the last month, the calls had become entirely one-sided, and I want to describe exactly what that was like, because I think people who haven't done it imagine it as quieter than it actually is.

You call at the appointed hour, because keeping the hour is the only ritual left that still means anything. Seven in the morning in Los Angeles, half past six in the evening in Mirdamad. Fatemeh khanom, or my mother, holds the phone near enough to his face that you can see him — thinner now, the specific hollowing that happens around the eyes, a stillness that used to belong only to photographs and now belongs to him even while he's breathing in front of you, in a bed with rails, in his mother's room, with the

window she used to sit beside on his left — and you begin to talk, because that is what you are told to do, that is the entire assignment: talk, he can hear you, keep talking, it helps him even if he can't respond.

I remember, in the earliest of these calls, still hoping for something back — not words necessarily, just some flicker of the face, an eyebrow, a shift in the eyes that suggested a person was still assembling meaning behind them. I would pause deliberately after certain sentences, leaving a gap the way you would in an ordinary conversation, some old reflex refusing to fully accept that the gap would never again be filled from the other side. Over the weeks, I stopped leaving those gaps. It felt, eventually, less like patience and more like a small, repeated cruelty to both of us — asking a question I already knew wouldn't be answered, then sitting in the silence as if I were still expecting different.

It had not been like that at first. I want that on the record, because the last month has a way of erasing the two before it. In December, home from the hospital, in the new bed, he was still — for stretches, for whole calls — himself. He complained about the bed. He complained about the bed at length, to me, to Amir, to Fatemeh khanom, to my mother, who had bought it and who sat on the edge of it and let him. He said the mattress had been designed “by a man who has never once lain down.” He said the rails made him feel “like an expensive cheese.” And once, on a call in the second week of January, when Fatemeh khanom had turned the phone so that I could see the window and the chair beside the bed, he looked straight into the camera, with a face that was for a moment entirely the face from the photographs, and said, in the sarcastic register, the one he saved for the things he meant most: “Boloor. Ali. Look at you. The light of the house.” And laughed, with no sound, with the whole picture shaking.

Nobody had called me that, and meant it, since I was nine years old. It was my grandfather's word, my father's father's, a joke about a child who never smiled, and it had died with him in the autumn of 1376 and had not been said aloud in that family in twenty-eight years, and it came up out of my father on a Tuesday in

January from somewhere so far down that I do not think he knew, himself, whose mouth it had come from. I laughed. I want that on the record too. I laughed so hard that she came in from the other room, and I could not explain to her what was funny, because it was not funny, and it was the funniest thing anybody had ever said to me.

That was the last time he said my name.

* * *

So I talked. I told him, on one of those calls in February, that we had decided to move — that the woman who had once asked me, gently, whether there was really no way back, had found a flat with light in it, real light, four windows, and that we were going to take it together, and that I wanted him to be the first to know, even though I understood, saying it, that I might be the only one in the conversation who would ever know it had been said. Nothing in his face changed. I kept talking anyway, describing the rooms, the street, the lemon tree we were leaving behind, a joke he would have made about the rent, filling the silence with the shape of a father who might have said it, because it was the closest I could get to actually hearing him say it.

I told him, on another call, that a room I had built had opened — a small permanent room at a water authority out in the east of the county, about where the water comes from and what it costs — and that a stranger had stood in the first part of it for four minutes, exactly as I had intended, before I let him have the second wall. I described it in more detail than the moment probably warranted, the sightlines, the exact panel, because I wanted him to have it the way you want to hand someone a gift even when you suspect their hands can no longer close around it.

There was one call, in between those two, that I've never told anyone about in quite this much detail, because it embarrasses me a little even now. I had nothing new to report that week — no milestone, no announcement, nothing that felt worth the ritual — and I called anyway, at the appointed hour, and simply described, for nearly ten minutes, an ordinary Tuesday. What I'd eaten. A

mildly annoying conversation with a colleague. The weather, in tedious, granular detail, the kind of detail no one requests and no one usually wants. I did this because it occurred to me, sitting there listening to his breathing on the other end, that these were exactly the calls he used to make to me — the ones with no news in them at all, just company, just a voice filling a room. I understood, describing my own unremarkable Tuesday into his silence, that I was finally, belatedly, learning to make the kind of call he had been making to me for fifteen years, and that I had learned it only once he could no longer receive it the way it was intended.

And I told him, on the last call I remember clearly, that the fern on the windowsill — the little one, the one that grows on the wet stone at the edge of every fountain in the country he was lying in, that I had bought in a pot on Fletcher from a man who did not know its name — had put out a new leaf that week, a small ordinary miracle that happens in a million kitchens every single day and had never once, before that phone call, felt like something I needed my own father to witness. I said it into a silence so complete that Fatemeh khanom, in the background, said again, gently, “He can hear you, agha, keep going,” and I understood, saying it a second time in a slightly smaller voice, that I no longer fully believed her, and that I was going to keep talking anyway, because the alternative was hanging up on a father who was still, technically, alive to hang up on, and I could not make myself do that.

* * *

These calls left me hollowed out in a way that has no comparison in my life before them. It is a specific, particular exhaustion — the exhaustion of loving someone loudly into a silence, of performing an entire relationship alone, both halves of it, because one half has gone somewhere you cannot follow and cannot even properly picture. I would hang up and sit very still for a while afterwards, in whatever room I happened to be in, and feel something that was not quite grief yet, because he was still, in the most technical sense, here — feel instead something closer to a rehearsal for grief, a kind of practising, my body quietly getting ready for a loss it

somehow already understood was coming, even while the man himself was still, in a bed on the other side of the world, breathing.

My mother carried a different version of this weight, the version that comes from proximity rather than distance — the daily visits, the arrangements with Fatemeh khanom, the small physical indignities of caregiving that neither of her sons ever had to witness firsthand and that she has still, even now, only described to me in fragments, as if the fuller account is something she's protecting me from, or perhaps protecting herself from by not saying it all out loud in one sitting. She was sixty-seven, with a knee, and a right hand that has not been entirely right since the winter of 2021, and she went to that house most days for two months to sit on the edge of a bed she had bought for a man she had divorced, and she never once, on any call, made either of her sons feel the size of what she was doing, which I understand now was the largest thing anybody did in the whole of that winter.

And there is one more thing about those weeks, and it is hers, and I am going to put it here because she will not.

For fourteen years he had sent her messages. Dozens a day, hundreds some days, a man's whole afternoon arriving in a woman's kitchen one line at a time. And somewhere in January, from the bed, with the phone she had put in his good hand, they slowed. And then they were one a day, a photograph of the ceiling, a word. And then, one week, there were none. She told me this on a call in the level voice, and then she stopped, and I heard the refrigerator, and she said: "I sent him the picture of the fern. Yours. He didn't answer. Fourteen years, Ali jan, and that man never once didn't answer me." And then, after a pause I did not fill: "I'm all right. Don't do the voice."

I think often about the asymmetry of what we each carried in those months — her exhaustion made of proximity, ours made of distance, neither one lighter than the other, all three of us occasionally, privately, resentful of a weight we couldn't fully explain to somebody standing in the other position. We have talked about this since, carefully, the way you talk about old wounds you have mostly forgiven each other for, and I don't think any of us has fully

resolved it. I don't think it's the kind of thing that resolves. I think it's just one more shape grief takes when it has to be split unevenly between three people who all loved the same failing man from three different distances.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

[INTERIOR IV]

Warm.

That is most of what is left, some days — not a scene, not a face, not even the folding-together of faces from before. Just warm, and something like being held, though held by what, or when, has stopped being a question that needs an answer.

There was a taste once. It is still, faintly, here — saffron, or something saffron-adjacent, a memory of a memory of a taste, arriving without the meal attached to it, without the table, without the hands that made it. It arrives the way a single note arrives after an entire song has otherwise gone quiet, and it is, in whatever way anything is still anything in here, good. It is the last good thing with a name he no longer needs in order to still recognise.

Somewhere, very far off, a voice is still occasionally shaped like love. He cannot tell anymore whose voice, or what it wants, or what year it thinks it's calling from. He does not need to. The shape is enough. The shape has always, in the end, been the entire point — not the words, not the specific news, not the specific son, just the fact of a voice bothering, still, to reach this far, to keep reaching even into whatever this has become.

He is warm, and something in the far distance still loves him, and there is a taste like saffron that asks nothing of him, and that, on the days there is anything left to call a day, is the whole of the world now, and it is, in its own reduced and merciful way, enough.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

[PRESENT]

He died a week before his birthday.

I want to start with that, because it is the only fact about his death that has a shape, and because he would have made a joke about it — about the timing, about the present he'd saved everybody the trouble of buying, about cheshmam roshan — and nobody else in the family has been able to, and so the joke has been sitting there for months, unmade, and this is the nearest I can get to making it for him.

His body had been failing, quietly, for longer than any of us fully registered — the sugar, the weight, the heart that a cardiologist had mentioned once, years ago, and that everyone had then stopped mentioning because it became simply a fact about a person, like his height — and then the hip, and then the bed, and then the long slow business of a mind coming apart in a room that smelled of his mother's cooking. I think, now, that the body had been absorbing things for decades that had nowhere else to go — the marriage he sat inside without a word, the firm he walked out of, the two years at his mother's bedside and everything those years had cost him afterwards, the ocean crossed and recrossed, the house that stopped asking anything of him — and that a body can only be asked to hold so much before it decides, quietly, on its own schedule, that it has held enough.

It happened in the early hours, on a Friday in February, in his sleep, in the bed my mother bought, in the room his mother died in, in the house that had been the only place left for so long it had stopped being a retreat and simply become the last address. Fatemeh khanom found him in the morning, the way she had found him on the bathroom floor five months earlier, except that this time there was nothing to apologise for and nobody to apologise to. No struggle, as far as anyone could tell. No final crisis, no hospital corridor, no machines counting down anything for an audience. My mother, when she called to tell me, said the only thing that made

any sense to either of us: "That house finally let him go somewhere."

* * *

I got the call at an hour that would have been the middle of his morning and, for me, the last hour of Thursday night, and I understood, picking up the phone and seeing my mother's name before she'd said a single word, exactly what I was about to be told, the way you sometimes know the shape of a sentence half a second before its first word arrives.

I did not book a flight. That is the sentence I have rewritten most often in this book, and it will not get any better. There was no flight to book. I sat on the floor of a bathroom in Frogtown, the same floor I had sat on five years earlier when a cousin texted to say my mother had had a stroke, with a phone in my hand, and could not stand up for a while, and the woman I live with came and sat on the floor beside me and did not say anything, and after a while I called my brother, and my brother, forty minutes away, had already had the call, and had already understood what I was in the process of understanding, which was that between the two of us, two grown men with two passports and two cars and money in two accounts, we could not produce one son at a grave.

I will not pretend the grief that followed was simple, and I will not pretend it looked the way grief looks in the stories we tell about it — a single wound, clean, understood. It looked, instead, like sitting very still for a long time on a bathroom floor on the other side of the world, holding a phone that had gone silent, feeling several things at once that did not agree with each other: grief for the man in the photographs, thin and laughing, whom I had never once actually met; grief for the man in the lawn chair, and on the Friday calls, thinning in a different way, whom I had loved without ever fully knowing; and underneath both of those, something that arrived later and quieter and took me longer to admit even to myself — something that was not relief, exactly, but was standing

close enough to relief that for a long time I couldn't tell the two apart in the dark.

* * *

My mother handled it. I want that stated plainly, as a fact, without decoration, because the decoration would be mine and the fact is hers. The paperwork, the arrangements, the specific bureaucratic weight of proving to various offices that a man had, in fact, died, that the death was expected, that no further explanation was owed to anyone beyond what the doctors had already provided — a woman of sixty-seven, divorced from the deceased for fourteen years, did all of it, in three days, with Fatemeh khanom and a cousin and a phone, and I have never fully told her how grateful I am for that, for absorbing the logistics so that what was left for her sons, on a sofa in Los Angeles, was simply to grieve rather than to also be ashamed.

They buried him on the Monday, faster than I would have liked and exactly as fast as custom required, in a plot beside his mother's, close enough that I found myself thinking, watching it on a screen the size of my hand, that whatever argument had kept him tethered to her house for the last four years of his life had, in the end, got its final wish: he would not be far from her, not now, not ever again.

My mother held the phone. A cousin held it for the parts she could not. Amir sat on one end of my sofa and I sat on the other and between us, on the cushion, propped against a cup, was a rectangle of glass with our father's grave in it, in the morning light of a city we had both been born in and would not see again, and the sound that came out of it was the sound of that ceremony, which is a sound you would know anywhere on earth, and the picture was mostly the back of a stranger's coat.

My mother said afterwards that we were there. I have watched that footage. You cannot see us. There is a phone in a woman's hand, and beyond it a hole in the ground.

We were there.

* * *

His body, in the end, did what nothing and no one else in his life had managed to do for him. It ended the waiting. It gave him — and I believe this, I have come to believe it fully, even though I did not want to believe it at first — the one mercy that was still available, after all the others had already been spent: a door that opened quietly, in his sleep, a week short of a birthday, in the house that had held him at the end the way it had held his mother before him, with no one required to watch the leaving happen, no last argument, no last performance, nothing asked of him at all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

[PRESENT]

At the memorial in Irvine, an old man I didn't recognise took both my hands — both of them, the way nobody in California ever does, the way everybody in one neighbourhood in Tehran always did, carefully, without mentioning why — and said the phrase that everyone says, the one that means, more or less, may he be forgiven, may he be at rest. I had heard it a hundred times in my life, at other families' losses, and had always known exactly what to say back. It was a small, worn coin of a sentence, passed hand to hand, and you were supposed to hand it back with a nod and a word of your own.

I opened my mouth and found I had nothing to hand back. Not because I didn't believe it. Because I didn't know, anymore, what rest would even look like for a man who had spent his last months being slowly erased from the inside — whether the mercy was in the forgiveness or in the fact that there was, at last, nothing left in him that needed forgiving, or wanting, or remembering. I said "thank you," which was not an answer, and the old man patted my hands and moved on, satisfied, and I understood that most of the coin's value was in the shape of it, not the meaning, and that this was probably fine. That most of what people say at funerals is a shape.

* * *

It took months for the second thing to arrive, and when it did, it arrived quietly, on a Tuesday, at seven in the morning, while I was standing at the counter of the new flat with the kettle on.

I noticed that my stomach no longer tightened at seven.

For five months, seven in the morning had been a small, private siege. It was the hour I used to call, before the calls stopped meaning anything, and later it became the hour Fatemeh khanom or my mother would call me, and my stomach had learned the sound of my own phone the way a soldier learns the sound of a particular engine. Bad news travelled at seven in the morning. It had travelled at seven in the morning so many times that my body had simply started arriving at the news before the news did.

And now it was a Tuesday, and it was seven, and there was nothing. She wanted the white cheese, not the yellow one, and I put it on the table, and somewhere in the putting I realised that the siege had ended, and that some part of me — some low, unlit, unphilosophical part — was grateful.

I stood very still with the cheese in my hand.

I thought: what kind of son feels his shoulders come down after his father is buried.

I turned the thought over the way you turn over a stone you don't want to see what's under, already knowing. Guilt arrived first, fast and total, the way it always does, telling me this was proof of something ugly in me, some deficiency that had been there all along and had finally been given permission to show itself now that no one could be hurt by it. I had read, once, somewhere, that this happens to people, this small shameful loosening, and had thought at the time: not me, I would never feel that, I love him too much for that. I had been wrong. Love, it turned out, had nothing to do with it, or everything to do with it, I couldn't tell which, and that not-knowing was its own kind of grief I hadn't been warned about.

Because underneath the guilt, when I made myself look, there wasn't relief that my father was gone. There was relief that the waiting was gone. The two were not the same animal, though they

wore the same coat, and it had taken me months to tell them apart in the dark.

* * *

I still wanted the phone to ring. I wanted it so badly some nights that I'd hold my own phone in both hands like it might do something if I asked it kindly enough. I wanted, specifically, my father's voice — thinned out, slow, wrong in a dozen small ways by the end — saying my name the way he used to say it, stretched a little long, like he was buying himself a second to remember which son he was talking to. I wanted that voice so much it made my teeth hurt.

And in the same chest, at the same hour, I did not want to hear the other voice. The one that had replaced it. The one that said nothing back, or said something that belonged to no year and no memory either of us shared, or simply breathed against the receiver while a woman in the background said he can hear you, agha, keep talking, he likes hearing you talk — and I would keep talking, into that silence, telling a bed-bound stranger who had once been my father that we had found a flat with light in it, that Amir's daughter had lost a tooth, that the weather had been strange all week, and getting nothing back but breath. I did not think I could survive many more of those calls. I had said so, once, to her, at two in the morning, ashamed of the sentence even as it left me: I don't know if I can keep doing this. And then my father had done the one last, enormous kindness available to him, which was to stop needing anyone to keep doing it.

Grief was new to me. I wanted to say that in my own defence, to whoever was going to judge me for the unclenching in my shoulders — I have never done this before, not like this, not from here, I don't have the customs for it, I am improvising a decency I was never taught. Nobody had told me that you could love a person completely and be glad, in some wordless, disloyal cellar of yourself, that you would not have to watch them not know you anymore. Nobody had told me grief could come dressed as relief

and still be grief, still be love, just love that had run out of anywhere useful to go.

I put the cheese down. She said my name, once, from the table, because I had gone somewhere, and I came back, the way I had told her I would, and sat down across from her, and we ate, and I made myself look at her face while she talked, because I had, finally, someone to practise on — someone whose favourite song and favourite food and favourite place I intended, with something like ferocity, to always be able to name.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

[PRESENT]

The fortieth day fell inside Nowruz, which my father would have found either very funny or very rude, and I have not been able to decide which.

We gathered again in Irvine, at Farah's house this time rather than the hall, a smaller thing, quieter than the first, fewer strangers, more of the people who had actually known him — my aunts, Mr Rostami, two men from the garden years, a cousin of Farhad's who had driven him to the airport once. In Tehran, my mother did the same, on the same day, in the house in Mirdamad, with Fatemeh khanom and the neighbours and the chair by the window left empty, and she sent me a photograph of the sofreh she had laid, and I looked at it for a long time. Nobody asked me for a favourite song this time. I think now that this is simply how it goes: the impossible questions get asked once, early, when everyone still believes there must be an answer somewhere, and then, once no answer arrives, people quietly agree not to ask again, the way you stop checking a pocket you've already searched twice.

Amir and I ended up outside, in the garden, in the two lawn chairs, doing what we always do now when we're together and the grief gets too crowded indoors — trading stories, the way we used to trade them as boys, except now the trading has a different weight to it, each story a small act of preservation rather than simple entertainment. He told me a version of the parking incident I hadn't heard before, an earlier one, from before either of us had left, in

which our father had apparently gone so far as to leave a note under the offending windscreen wiper, then retrieved it ten minutes later out of what Amir assumed was embarrassment, and folded it into his pocket rather than delivering it, carrying the undelivered verdict around in his coat for the rest of the day like evidence of a crime only he knew about. I told him about the record player, the four unknown records, the neighbour's broom handle. Neither of us had heard the other's story before. This is, I think, one of the stranger mercies of losing a parent from a distance — that there is still, even now, new material surfacing between the two of us who are left, small deposits of him we hadn't yet spent, and I suspect we'll keep finding them for years, the way you keep finding coins in the pockets of a coat you thought you'd emptied.

And then Amir said, looking out at the garden and not at me, in the only way my brother has ever been able to give anybody anything: "Do you think he knew? At the end. That we couldn't come."

I said I didn't know.

And he said: "No. Me neither."

And that was it, and it was enough, and I have thought about it every day since.

* * *

I found myself, near the end of the evening, standing again by the same photograph — the one from the first gathering, the good one, the one where my father was caught mid-sentence, one hand slightly raised, an expression that wasn't quite a smile but wasn't far from one either, propped now on my aunt's mantelpiece between a bowl of painted eggs and a dish of sprouted wheat. I looked at it for a long time.

I thought about the dervishes again, the image that had first come to me sitting on a kitchen floor watching a woman empty a room on a screen. I had looked it up since then, the actual history of it, more than I'd known before — the turning as a discipline, a lifetime of practice aimed at a single goal, which was to arrive, eventually, at nothing: no possessions, no attachments, no self left standing

between the person and whatever came next. I had thought, at the time, that my father's empty room only resembled that discipline by accident, by exhaustion rather than intention.

I'm not sure anymore that the distinction matters as much as I'd assumed.

Whatever the reasons — a marriage that ended in silence rather than in a fight, a job walked out of on principle, a mother's death that took the last argument for leaving, a country his sons could not enter, or simply a temperament that had never accumulated much to begin with — my father had arrived, by the end, at a version of that same emptiness. A room with almost nothing in it. Four shirts and a receipt. A body that had finally been allowed to stop carrying what it had carried for so long. A mind that had, by whatever mercy or cruelty governs such things, forgotten the very griefs it had never been able to resolve while it still had the capacity to remember them. I do not know whether my father found any peace in that forgetting. I know only that from the outside, on a screen, in the last weeks, there had been a stillness in his face that looked, at certain angles, almost like the calm of someone who had finally put something down.

I thought of it, standing in front of the photograph, as a doorway rather than an ending — not because I believe, particularly, in doorways, but because it was the only image that let me hold both halves of it at once: the son who wanted to keep him, and the son who understood, eventually, that the kindest thing left to want, for a man who had run out of quality of life long before he ran out of life, was for the door to finally open.

I did not cry at this gathering, the way I had at the first one. I stood for a while longer in front of the photograph, said nothing that anyone else could hear, and then went to find my brother, because there was, after everything, still a whole family left on this side of the door, on two continents, in two kitchens, and someone needed to ask what was for dinner.

EPILOGUE

[INTERIOR — SPECULATION]

Nobody can know what this was actually like from the inside, and this book has said so already, more than once. What follows is offered in that same spirit — not as claimed fact, but as the only kind of understanding still available to the people left holding the question.

There must have been alert moments, even near the end. Not many, and not for long, but the doctors said as much, gently, the way doctors learn to say things that are both a comfort and a warning at once: that recognition can flicker back briefly, unpredictably, like a signal catching a tower it had drifted out of range of. In those moments, if they happened the way we hope they happened, I like to imagine it was something like surfacing — not confusion clearing all at once, but a single window opening in a house otherwise gone dark, just long enough to feel warmth arrive through it before it closed again. A voice saying his name. A flat hand on a blanket that felt like it belonged to someone. Perhaps, for a few seconds, something almost like being him again — not enough to organise a sentence, not enough to reach for the phone himself and send the three hundredth message of the day, but enough, maybe, to feel loved without needing to understand exactly why, or by whom, or for how long that feeling might last before the window shut.

I hope, in those moments, that what reached him wasn't the news itself — not the specific fact of a flat with light in it, or a room with a wall of names, or a fern on a sill — but the tone underneath the news, the register of a voice trying, across an impossible distance, to hand him something good. I think tone might survive longer than meaning does. I have to believe that, because it's the only version of those one-sided phone calls I can live with: that some current of this is good, this is us, this is us wanting you here for it got through, even on the calls where nothing in his face moved at all.

And there must have been the other moments too — many more of them, by the end, than the alert ones — the ones the illness itself made, the long stretches where nothing organised enough to call a

thought was happening at all. I don't think this was darkness, exactly, though it would be easy to assume so from outside a hospital bed. Darkness requires a boundary, an edge you can sense yourself pressed against. I think it might have been closer to what a candle experiences before being lit — not suffering, not absence exactly, just an interval with no experiencer present to suffer through it. Time, if it existed for him at all in those stretches, might not have passed the way it passes for the rest of us, second stacked on second. It might have simply not been happening, the way it isn't happening for a stone, or for the year 1962, or for any of the countless hours of our own lives we've already forgotten completely without ever once mourning the loss of them.

That thought used to frighten me. It doesn't anymore, or not in the same way. Because if that's true — if those long stretches truly were closer to nothing than to suffering — then some of what looked, from our side of the phone, like the cruellest possible ending, may have been, from his side, no ending at all. Just an absence with no one inside it left to be afraid of the dark.

A bed by a window. Warm light through fabric. A smell that might be saffron, or might only be the memory of a memory of it.

And then, simply, a door — unremarkable, unhurried, standing very slightly open, the way a door stands open in a house where someone is expected home any minute, the way a certain door in a certain apartment in Elahieh used to stand open, eight floors up, on the evenings a boy in a thin jacket was late.

He goes through it.

Nothing comes back to tell us, with certainty, which of these it was — the surfacing or the stone, the window or the interval with no one behind it. Perhaps, at the very end, it was neither, and simply became, for the first time in years, entirely his own business again.

GLOSSARY

Agha [aa-GHAA] — Persian, *sir, master*. A respectful form of address to a man, used alone or before a name.

Azizam [a-zee-ZAM] — Persian, *my dear*. An endearment, used to family, to children, and to anyone being spoken to gently.

Baba [baa-BAA] — Persian, *father*. What a child calls his father, and goes on calling him.

Boloor [bo-LOOR] — Persian, *crystal*. Used as a name for a child; in this family it carried the further sense of the light of the house.

Esfand [es-FAND] — The twelfth and last month of the Solar Hijri calendar, running from late February to late March.

Jan [JAAN] — Persian, *dear, soul*. Appended to a name as an endearment — Ali jan.

Khanom [KHAA-nom] — Persian, *lady*. A courtesy title following a woman's given name.

Nowruz [no-ROOZ] — The Iranian new year, falling at the spring equinox and beginning the Solar Hijri year.

Sofreh [sof-REH] — Persian, *spread cloth*. The cloth laid out for a meal or a ceremony, and by extension the spread itself.

At his father's memorial a man is asked the three easiest questions there are. What song did he love. What food. What place. He is sitting in the good chair, the one nearest the photograph, the one reserved for a son, and he cannot answer any of them.

The hall is in Orange County, eleven thousand kilometres from the grave. His father was buried six days earlier, in Tehran, in the morning, and he watched it on a telephone propped against a cup. His brother watched it from the other end of the same sofa. Neither of them could go.

What he has instead is a marriage that ended in silence rather than in shouting, a house that stopped being a retreat and became the only place left, and a year of Friday telephone calls into which a voice slowly stopped arriving.

Then, at a table, somebody says *you went somewhere* — and he recognises the silence as his father's, arriving late and from the inside.

We were there.



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