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THE EVENING OF STRANGERS

The Gharibān



C H E W Z

A Roya Publication

THE EVENING OF STRANGERS

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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THE ADDRESSES

eleven years, nine addresses, and no decision



There are, depending on how you count, somewhere between eleven and twenty places in greater Los Angeles where the ten nights are observed. I know where nine of them are. I did not seek that out; at no point did I sit down and research it. It accumulated — a flyer in a grocery on Westwood, a man at a wedding mentioning his heyat in the Valley, a Persian radio station in a taxi in August, a WhatsApp forward from a cousin of Farhad's that I never opened and never deleted. By 2019 I could have driven to any of them from my apartment in under an hour. I never went. Not once in eleven years. And here is the strangest fact in this entire book: I never once decided not to.

SYNOPSIS

Ali Shabani arrives in Los Angeles in May 2010 with one suitcase, nine hundred dollars, two hands that do not fully close, and a story he cannot tell anybody. Nobody meets him at the airport.

He has a job in eight days. Then community college, then a degree, then work he is good at. He grows his hair, puts a ring through his nose and takes it out again, tries himself on for the first time in his life, and finds — genuinely, unmistakably — that he is happy. For eleven years he builds everything himself and, as he tells it, nobody helps him and nothing is given to him, and the strength that takes is the most attractive thing about him.

It is also the lock.

Because there are some small things. He leaves a wedding. He replaces a light fixture on his second day and does not think about why. He has a playlist he calls taste. There are somewhere between eleven and twenty mourning halls in greater Los Angeles; he knows where nine of them are and has never once been in one, and has never once decided not to go.

And eleven thousand kilometres away, across eleven years and eleven telephone calls, his mother tells him the oldest story in their language — a young man accused of something he did not do, proved innocent in front of an entire city, and destroyed anyway by people who were kind to him.

Then a nineteen-year-old in a garage in Highland Park looks at him with a particular expression, and Ali recognises it, because he made it once himself, at a gate, at four in the morning, when he was fourteen years old.

Book Two of the Ghariban.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Everyone has a room they do not go into.

Not a metaphor, and not a trauma in the clinical sense. Just a room. A thought you had once and were frightened by. Something you wanted and should not have wanted. A moment you were present at and have never described accurately to anybody, including yourself, including in the dark, including now.

Most people manage this extremely well. That is the thing nobody says out loud. The doors hold. People go to work and raise children and are decent to strangers with the room still in the house, and they are not lying and they are not ill, and there is nothing underneath waiting to be released.

This imprint has spent sixty-one books saying: bring your ugliest thought, there is a chair for it. Sit down. Say it out loud. Nothing you have in you is beyond being written down and looked at.

I would like to enter one qualification, and this is the book where I do it.

That is not true in every case.

Some doors are load-bearing. Some people are standing up *because* of what they are not looking at, and the strength is real, and the life built on it is real, and the kindness is real, and opening the door does not make any of it more real. It only means a man is on a floor.

I have watched people be opened by professionals who meant it kindly. I have watched a few of them not get up.

The man in this book is the strongest person I have written. He is generous and self-made and awake, and he has done more with less than almost anybody I know. And every single one of those qualities is also the hand on the door.

I am not telling you to keep it shut. I am telling you that I do not know, and that anybody who is certain either way is selling something.

Bring your ugliest thought. There is a chair for it.

But look at the door on your way past, and be honest with yourself about what it is holding up.

Chew Z

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PART ONE — THE FLOOR

1. THE YEARS — 2010

Nobody met me.

I want to start there because for eleven years I have listened to people describe their own arrivals and there is always somebody at the barrier. A cousin with a sign. An uncle who has taken the afternoon off. A woman crying into a phone.

I came out of customs at Tom Bradley at twenty past two in the afternoon on the eighteenth of May 2010, with one suitcase and a canvas bag, and the doors opened and there was a crowd of about three hundred people and not one of them was for me.

My cousin Farhad was going to come and then his shift changed. He texted. It was a completely reasonable text. He gave me the address and told me to take a shuttle and said he'd leave the key with the manager, and all of that worked exactly as described.

I stood there for about four minutes anyway.

Not upset. Not lost. Just standing in the airport in a country I had never been in, with a bag, watching other people's families do the thing families do at barriers, and thinking — and I remember this precisely, it is one of maybe six thoughts I can date to the minute — thinking:

All right. So it's this.

And then I went and found the shuttle.

* * *

I was twenty-one years old and I had two hands that did not fully close and about nine hundred dollars.

* * *

Farhad's apartment was in Van Nuys, on a street with four palm trees on it, and the palm trees were the first thing that got me. Not because they were beautiful. Because they were exactly the same as the ones in the films, and that is a very stupid thing to be moved by, and I sat down on the step of that building with my suitcase and looked at a palm tree for a while like a tourist.

The heat was the second thing. It was May and it was dry and the air smelled of hot dust and somebody's laundry and gasoline, and it was, and I did not know how to say this at the time, **familiar**. Los Angeles in May smells more like Tehran in Mordad [mor-DAAD] than anywhere else on earth. Two enormous dry cities in a bowl with mountains behind them and too many cars. I have met people who found California alien. I was not one of them. I got off a shuttle in the San Fernando Valley and my body said: yes, this. I know this shape.

The floor was a foam mattress in the front room and I slept on it for six weeks.

* * *

I called my mother that night. It was morning there.

My mother's name is Layla [LEY-laa]. I have not written it down in eleven years except on forms, and it looks strange to me on a page, the way your own handwriting does in somebody else's house.

She said: are you there? and I said I'm here, and she said: is it hot?

I said very.

And she said: put a wet towel on the window if there's no air. Your grandmother used to. It works.

Which was the least useful advice anybody has ever given me about a two-bedroom apartment in the San Fernando Valley in 2010, and which I have never forgotten, because what she was doing was reaching across eleven thousand kilometres to hand me something. Anything. A towel.

I said I would.

She said: Ali jan. Are you all right.

And I said yes.

I have said yes to that question, in that voice, several hundred times over eleven years, and I want to note, this early, before anything else has happened, that I do not believe I was ever lying.

2. THE CALL — the woman in the forest

She started it about two weeks in, and she did not announce it and she did not ask if I wanted it, which is how everything of any importance has ever been given to me.

She said: do you know how Siavash [see-yaa-VASH] begins?

I said I know the fire.

She said: everybody knows the fire. Nobody knows the beginning and the beginning is the whole thing.

* * *

There were two young men out hunting in the forest, she said. Tus [TOOS] and Giv [GEEV]. Great men, famous men, the kind the poem is full of. And they had gone further out than they meant to, into a forest on the border, and in that forest they found a girl.

She was asleep, or she was hiding. She was extraordinarily beautiful and she was alone and she was very well dressed and she was in a forest on the border between two countries that had been at war for a hundred years.

They asked her who she was.

And my mother, who is an art historian and who has spent her whole life looking at things properly, said: pay attention to what she tells them, Ali, because she is a girl on her own in a forest and she is going to say whatever keeps her alive.

She said her father had beaten her. She said her family were Turanian nobility. She said she had run away in the night.

And she gave a name, and the name was from the enemy side, and the two young men understood in about four seconds that this girl was worth something to somebody.

* * *

So they fought over her. Actually fought — swords out, in the forest, two of the great heroes of Iran, over which of them found her first and therefore which of them owned her.

And they were still fighting when somebody sensible said: take her to the King.

So they took her to Kavus [kaa-VOOS]. And Kavus looked at her and did what kings did, which is that he kept her.

She was married into the royal house of a country she had been at war with, by men who had been arguing over her ownership an hour earlier, and nobody at any point asked her a question she was not required to answer correctly.

* * *

She said: and she had a son.

She said: and he was so beautiful that when they brought him out, the whole court went quiet.

And then she said — and she said it plainly, without weight, and it took me eleven years to hear what she had put in my hands:

And then she was gone from the story. That's all. She isn't mentioned again. She has a son and she disappears out of the poem and Ferdowsi [fer-dow-SEE] does not tell you what happened to her.

She said: he is a boy of enemy blood in the palace of his father's country, and the one person in the world who was from where he was from is not there any more.

* * *

I was lying on a foam mattress in Van Nuys with the phone on my chest and I said: that's a bad start.

And my mother laughed and said: it's a *Persian* start. Everything of ours begins with somebody being taken somewhere.

And then she said: are you eating?

3. THE YEARS — eight days

I had a job in eight days and I have never once let anybody make that sound like a virtue, because it was not one. It was fear, professionally applied.

The car wash was on Sepulveda and it was called Sunshine Auto Spa and it was run by an Armenian man named Vartan who had been in the country since 1988 and who hired me in about ninety seconds, in a mixture of two languages, on a Tuesday.

He looked at my hands.

That is the first thing that happened to me in American employment. He took my right hand and turned it over and looked at the palm and looked at me and said nothing at all, and then said: you can grip?

I said yes.

He said: show me.

And I gripped his hand, hard, with the hand that closes about eighty per cent, and he nodded and said be here at seven and that was the entire interview.

He never mentioned it again. Not once, in the two years I worked for him. I have thought about Vartan a great deal and I think what happened in that ninety seconds is that a man who had arrived here at thirty-one with his own history looked at a twenty-one-year-old with something wrong with his hands and made a decision not to require an explanation.

That was my introduction to this country and it was, I want to say, extremely representative. People here will let you be from nowhere. They will let you have arrived fully formed at twenty-one with two scars and no past, and they will not ask, and it is the single greatest gift on offer and it is also, if you are a certain sort of person, a very comfortable place to hide.

* * *

Eleven dollars an hour and tips. Seven to four, six days.

The work was: pull the car through, wipe, wheels, glass, move. It was hot and repetitive and I was extremely good at it within about a week, and I need to be honest about why, and the honest reason is that I had spent six years of my adolescence doing a coordinated

physical thing in a row of men for four hours at a stretch and my body knew how to do that.

I did not think about it that way at the time. At the time I thought I was just a hard worker.

* * *

I saved with a specific and slightly deranged discipline. Four hundred a month to Farhad for the floor and then the room, food that I cooked, no car for the first year, buses everywhere, and everything else went into an envelope and then into an account.

The number was community college and then transfer, and I had worked it out on paper on the plane.

I want to put down what that year was actually like, because there is a version of the immigrant year that gets told and it is either misery or triumph and mine was neither.

It was: getting up at half five. The bus on Sepulveda with the windows open. Nine hours in the sun. The specific pleasure of a cold drink at four in the afternoon when you have been outside since seven. Coming home and cooking rice badly and then better. Learning the freeway names the way you learn the names of streets in a poem. A library card. The enormous quiet of a Sunday when you know nobody.

And a kind of happiness I had never had access to before in my life, which was the happiness of nobody knowing who I was.

Nobody in Los Angeles knew what my father's silence sounded like across a dinner table, or that my grandfather had died with a word in his mouth that nobody in the family used. Nobody knew about the north or the south of a city eleven thousand kilometres away. Nobody knew what a heyat [hey-AT] was, or whose son I was, or whose grandson, or what had happened to my hands.

I was twenty-one and completely unwitnessed and I have never felt lighter in my life.

4. THE CALL — the man who raised him

She said: so they gave the baby away.

I said what?

She said: not away. Kavus looked at his son and understood — and this is the only clever thing that man does in the entire poem — he understood that he was not capable of raising him.

So he sent for Rostam [ros-TAM].

* * *

She had to explain Rostam to me, or she pretended to, which was her way of telling a story properly. Rostam is the great one. The enormous one. Six hundred years old by some counts, the strongest man alive, the one every Iranian child can draw. He came down from Zabolestan [zaa-bo-les-TAAN] and looked at this baby and said: give him to me.

And he took him home and he raised him.

She said: and this is my favourite part of the whole poem and nobody ever quotes it.

She said: Ferdowsi lists what he taught him.

Riding. The bow. The lasso. How to sit at a table. How to speak in an assembly. How to hunt. Wine and the correct behaviour around it. Falconry. Justice — actual justice, how to hear a case and decide it. How to be a guest. How to be a host.

She said: he taught him everything a man needs and he taught it to him personally, for years, and Ferdowsi says that Siavash learned all of it so completely that there was nothing left to teach.

She said: and then the boy said, I want to see my father.

* * *

I said: and Rostam let him go?

She said: Rostam took him himself. Rode with him the whole way and delivered him to the palace and presented him.

She said: and the court went mad for him. He was seventeen or so and he was the most accomplished young man anybody had ever seen and everyone said so, out loud, constantly.

And then she said the thing.

She said: and Kavus was delighted with him. Absolutely delighted. He had a son who had come back perfect.

She said: and I want you to notice, Ali, that Kavus is delighted with a thing that another man made.

* * *

There was a pause on the line and it was one of the ones where I can hear her deciding whether to say something.

She said: your father says something about you and Amir [a-MEER]. He said it again on Thursday, to the television.

I said what.

She said: he said Amir came out finished and you came out with instructions.

And she laughed, and I laughed, and it was a nice moment and I got off the phone about four minutes later and went to work.

I did not ask her what he meant. I was twenty-one and I had a shift.

I have had eleven years to ask her and I have never once done it.

5. THE YEARS — the first one who remembered

I started at Valley College in the autumn of 2011 with fifteen months of car wash money and a plan that fitted on one side of a piece of paper.

The plan was: two years, transfer, work through both. I did not deviate from it once and I want to be careful about how I say that, because it sounds like discipline and I have come to think it was closer to superstition. I had a piece of paper with a sequence on it and I followed the sequence the way you follow a rite. Do it exactly and something happens. Miss a step and it does not.

Nobody taught me to think like that. Or rather, somebody did, for ten nights a year, for six years, and I did not connect the two things until I was thirty-three and standing in a parking lot.

* * *

The first class I loved was a survey course and the professor was a woman named Diane Okafor who taught the nineteenth century and who had, as far as I could tell, no interest whatsoever in whether we liked her.

Third week she handed back a paper of mine with about four hundred words on the back of it. Four hundred. On a two-page assignment from a community college student in his second month.

And what she had written, mostly, was: *this is not the argument you think you are making, and the one you are actually making is more interesting, and you seem not to have noticed you were making it.*

I read it on the bus and then I read it again standing up at my stop and I missed the stop.

* * *

She kept me back after the next class and asked me where I was from and I said Iran and she said no, where did you *learn* — and made a gesture at the paper — this.

And I said nowhere.

Which was true and was also the biggest lie I told in my first three years in this country, and I told it without any awareness of telling it, which is the kind I have come to be most careful about.

Because the honest answer was: in a walled yard behind a butcher's shop in south Tehran, from a man with a microphone, on ten consecutive nights a year, from the age of nine.

That is where I learned to build something slowly and hold a room and put the weight in the right place and stop the instant before you have said too much. I learned structure from the rowzeh [row-ZEH]. I learned that you take one small hour and stay inside it

for twenty minutes. I learned that the whole craft is knowing when to stop building.

I told a professor at Valley College that I had learned it nowhere, and I believed myself.

* * *

She remembered my name. That was the thing. Two hundred students and she remembered my name in the second week and used it, and I went back to a room in Van Nuys that night and sat on the edge of a bed and felt something I did not have a word for.

I have a word for it now and the word is embarrassing. The word is *seen*.

For six years of my adolescence four hundred men had watched me every winter and I had thought that was being seen and it was not, it was being *looked at*, which is a different thing entirely and which I had confused with the first thing for my entire life.

A woman I had spoken to twice read two pages and told me what I was actually doing.

I would have done anything for her. I mean that in a completely unromantic way. I would have carried furniture.

6. THE CALL — the queen

She called on a Friday and she had her serious voice and I thought something had happened at home and instead she said: are you sitting down? Because this one is unpleasant.

I said I'm at work.

She said: then I'll do it badly. Sudabeh [soo-daa-BEH].

* * *

Sudabeh was Kavus's wife. She had come to him out of a war too — everybody in this poem comes out of a war — and she had been loyal to him in a way that cost her, and Ferdowsi is not simple about her. That matters. My mother was extremely firm about it.

She is not a monster in the text. She is a woman in a palace with no power except one kind.

And she saw Siavash come home at seventeen from Rostam's house, finished, beautiful, admired by everyone, and she wanted him.

She said: she manoeuvred. Properly, patiently, over months. She got him brought into the women's quarters on legitimate business. She arranged to be alone with him. She said things that could be taken two ways so that he would have to decide how to take them, which is the oldest trap there is.

And he refused her. Politely, every time. He was seventeen and he had been raised by Rostam and he had been taught how to be a guest, and he behaved perfectly.

She said: and that is what finished him. If he had been rude she might have let it go. He was *correct*, and being correct at somebody is the most humiliating thing you can do to them.

* * *

So she went to the king.

She tore her own clothes and scratched her own face and went to Kavus and said: your son came for me.

And my mother said, on a Friday, from a kitchen in Elahieh [e-laa-hee-YEH], in a completely level voice:

She said: now. Kavus is not a fool in this moment. That is the part people miss. He investigates. He smells their clothes — that is actually in the poem, he smells them both — and he works out within a day that his wife is lying.

She said: and it changes nothing.

I said what?

She said: he knows she is lying and he still cannot let it go. Because now the court has heard it. Because now there are two versions in the air and one of them is about his son and one is about his wife and he has to be seen to do something.

She said: it stopped being about the truth about eleven minutes after it started.

* * *

I was standing in the corridor outside the break room at the car wash and I did not say anything for a moment, and she said: Ali?

And I said: sorry. Bad signal.

There was no bad signal.

I did not know why the number bothered me. I want that on the record. It was 2012 and I was twenty-three and a woman I love said a perfectly ordinary phrase on the telephone and something in my chest turned over and I attributed it to the fact that I had not eaten since six.

7. THE YEARS — the second day

The apartment was mine in 2012. A studio in Van Nuys, second floor, a window that faced a wall.

That was also the spring my parents stopped. I have written about it elsewhere and I am not going to do it again here, except to say that my mother told me on a Friday, in the level voice, from the kitchen, and that my father packed two suitcases and left an apartment that had never in any legal sense been his, and that when I carried a bed frame up two flights alone three weeks later I was thinking, without deciding to, about a man of fifty-two carrying two suitcases down eight floors because he would not, that morning, use the lift he had put in himself.

I did four things in the first forty-eight hours and I am going to list them, because I have listed them to myself perhaps a hundred times since and there is only one that matters.

I bought a bed frame from a man on Craigslist and carried it up alone in two trips.

I put down a rug. It was not a good one. It was the idea of a rug.

I called my mother and walked her around it on the phone, describing the rooms, and she said *is there light?* four separate times and I kept saying yes and she kept not believing me.

And on the second day I took down the light in the back hallway and put up a different one.

* * *

The one that was there was a bare bulb in a wire cage. A cheap outdoor-style fixture that somebody had put on an interior wall because it was what they had. It worked perfectly. There was nothing wrong with it.

I stood in that hallway with my bag still half unpacked and looked at it for I do not know how long and then I went to the hardware store on Victory and bought a flush ceiling fixture with a frosted glass cover for eleven dollars and changed it that afternoon.

I remember being pleased with myself. I remember thinking it looked better.

I did not think about it again for nine years.

* * *

There is one more thing about that apartment and it is small.

I never got a proper table. I ate on the floor for the whole two years I was there — a cloth down, the plate on the cloth, sitting cross-legged with my back against the sofa — and when Farhad came over he laughed at me about it, and I laughed too and said I hadn't got round to it.

I had eleven hundred dollars in an account. I could have got round to it in an afternoon.

My mother, when I told her, said: *sofreh* [*sof-REH*]. And I said what, and she said: that is what it is called, when you put the cloth down. You know that.

And I said I know, Maman.

She said: your grandmother did it her whole life and she had four tables.

8. THE CALL — the fire

She called at four in the morning my time.

She did that maybe twice a year and she always had a reason ready and the reason was never the reason. This time the reason was a photograph.

I was twenty-four and I had a shift at seven and I sat up in the dark on the edge of a bed in Van Nuys and said, Maman, it's four in the morning here.

She said: is it?

And we both let that stand.

* * *

She said: it's you at the aquarium. You're about five. You're furious.

I said: I don't remember an aquarium.

She said: you were furious because you wanted to stay in front of one fish and Amir wanted to keep walking. You stood in front of that glass for forty minutes. Your father wanted to move you and I said leave him.

She said: you have your hands behind your back like a little man. You look like an inspector.

And then she went quiet, and I could hear the room she was in — that specific acoustic of an apartment in Elahieh at four in the morning, which I had not stood in for two and a half years and would know anywhere on earth.

She said: I've been sitting with it a while.

* * *

I said: Maman, it's the middle of the night.

She said: I know.

Then, straight into it, no join, the way she has always done it: **do you want to hear about the fire?**

And I lay back down with the phone on the pillow and said yes.

* * *

She said: they built a mountain.

Two hundred camel-loads of wood, she said. Stacked in two great walls with a road between them wide enough for a horse. And they poured naphtha over all of it and they lit it, and the fire went up so high that the whole city came out to watch. So high that the people at the back could feel it on their faces. The smoke had a mountain of its own. It went black over the palace in the middle of the day.

She said: and then they brought out a boy on a black horse.

* * *

I could hear her getting up. A woman of fifty-four crossing a room she has lived in for twenty-two years. A cupboard. Water.

She said: he wore white.

She said: he had put on a white robe and a camphor crown, which is what they dressed the dead in, because he had decided that if he was going to be found guilty he would at least go into it dressed correctly.

She said: and he rode up to the fire and got down and went to his father.

And in front of the whole city, she said, he kissed his father's hand.

* * *

I did not say anything.

She said: and he said, don't be sad. This is what heaven wanted. If I am innocent I will come out. If I am not, then this is what should happen to me.

She said: and Kavus — and Ali, listen to me — his father did not stop it.

She said it very gently. She was not making a point. She was a woman of fifty-four telling her son a story she had known since she was nine.

She said: the boy gave him one last chance, standing in front of a fire the size of a hill, with the whole city watching, and he kissed his hand.

And his father let him get back on the horse.

* * *

She stopped.

I could hear her drinking water. I could hear a car go past on a street I grew up on.

She said: are you cold there? It gets cold at night, doesn't it.

I said it's fine, Maman.

She said: you never had enough on. Even here. You'd go out in Esfand [es-FAND] in that thin jacket and I'd shout and you'd stand in the doorway with your face like that.

She said: I still think about that. Isn't that stupid. Of everything.

* * *

I said: what happened in the fire.

She said: he rode straight into the middle of it and he was gone a long time. Long enough that people were weeping. Long enough that his father started to understand what he had done.

She said: and then he came out on the other side.

She said: and there was not a mark on him. Not on the robe, not on the horse, not on the crown. He came out of two hundred camel-loads of burning wood with his white clothes still white and Ferdowsi says he was smiling.

* * *

I said: so he was fine.

And my mother, eleven thousand kilometres away, at half past four in the afternoon, in the apartment I grew up in, said:

No, my love. He was proved. That's a different thing.

* * *

She said: the city went mad. They shouted for three days. His father wept on his neck and gave him gold and horses and begged him. Sudabeh should have died for it and Siavash asked that she be spared, because he was that sort of person.

She said: and after all of it — after the fire, after the proof, after three days of shouting — nothing in that house was ever the same again.

She said: his father had let him ride into it. And they both knew.

She said: **you can be proved innocent in front of an entire city, Ali, and still have to live in the house afterwards.**

* * *

I did not say anything for a while.

And she said, into the silence, in a completely different voice — the practical one, the one I would know in a crowd of ten thousand people:

Are you eating? Properly. Not the bread and the cheese. Properly.

I said yes.

She said: I don't believe you. I'm going to send you the advieh [ad-vee-YEH], the one you like. I'll give it to Mrs Kazemi's daughter, she's going in Khordad [khor-DAAD].

I said: Maman, you can buy it here. There's a shop on Westwood that has everything.

And she said: it isn't the same one.

And we both knew it was exactly the same one, and neither of us said so, because what she meant was *let me put something in your hands from here*, and there is no way to say that and no need.

* * *

I said: I have to sleep, Maman. It's nearly five.

She said: all right.

She said: Ali jan.

I said: yes.

And she said — and this is the part I have thought about most, and it took me until I was thirty-three to understand what she had been handing me one piece at a time for eleven years without either of us knowing:

She said: you know you don't have to prove anything to me. Don't you. You never did. Not once, not ever, not for one single day.

And I said: I know, Maman.

And she said: I don't think you do.

* * *

I lay in the dark for the fifty minutes I had left before the alarm and did not sleep and did not cry, and was not aware of not crying, and got up at ten to six and washed my face and went to work and had a fine day.

PART TWO — THE GOOD YEARS

9. THE YEARS — the hair

I grew my hair in 2013 and I kept it for two years and I want to explain what that actually was, because from the outside it is a young man in Los Angeles growing his hair, which is the least interesting event in the history of that city.

In Tehran I had a haircut. Not a style — a haircut, the one, the one every boy in my school had, because the alternative was a conversation. Short at the sides, a bit on top, done every six weeks by a man called Naser who had done my father's hair and who did not ask what I wanted because there was nothing to ask.

I did not object to it. It never occurred to me to object to it. That is the part I could not have explained to anybody here.

And then I was twenty-four in a country where nobody knew me and I simply did not go to the barber.

That was the whole decision. It was not a decision. It was an absence of one, for four months, and then one morning I was standing in a bathroom in Van Nuys pulling it back off my face with one hand and I looked at myself and thought: *oh*.

* * *

By the end of that year it was past my shoulders and I looked like somebody else.

A man at a bus stop on Victory once told me I looked like a Sufi who had got into a band. My brother, on video from Toronto, laughed for a full minute and then said, in Persian, *Maman is going to have a stroke*, and my mother did not have a stroke, she said: it's nice. You've got your grandfather's hair. Not the Perspolis [pers-PO-lis] one. The other one. My father, from a lawn chair in Irvine, looked at the screen for four full seconds and then asked whether I was eating.

* * *

Then the ring.

A septum ring, in 2014, from a place on Melrose, done by a woman with grey hair and forearms covered in ink who talked me through it like a nurse. It hurt more than I expected and my eyes ran and she said everyone's do.

I had it for about fourteen months. Then gauges in my ears for about eight, which were a mistake and which left me with two small permanent slack places that I am mildly embarrassed by. Then I took all of it out at once, in one evening, and never put any of it back.

There was a vegan year. There was a band, which was bad, in which I played bass adequately and wrote nothing. There was a period of about five months in which I wore only black, which is funny for reasons that took me a long time to find funny.

* * *

Here is what I want on the record about all of it, because I have heard other people from where I am from describe this badly.

I was not rebelling. There was nothing to rebel against. My mother thought the hair was nice. My brother thought it was funny. My father asked if I was eating. Nobody in Los Angeles cared at all — that is the entire point of Los Angeles, it is a city with an infinite tolerance for a man reinventing himself in public, and it will not applaud you for it either.

What I was doing was much stranger and much more boring than rebellion.

I was finding out what I was like.

I had been fifteen and had a personality assembled out of oppositions. My grandfather was red so I was blue. My family was secular so I went south. My brother was easy so I was the difficult one. Every single thing I was, I was *against something*, and that works perfectly well as a structure and it means you have never once found out what you would choose in an empty room.

I was twenty-four and alone in a room the size of a country and nobody was on the other side of anything.

So I tried things on. Most of them did not fit. Some of them fitted so badly that I still think about them. And the astonishing thing, the thing I was not prepared for, was that **it did not matter**. Nothing was lost. You could be a vegan with long hair and a septum ring for a year and then not be, and no one held it against you, and there was no committee.

I have never been able to make anybody from home understand how enormous that is.

10. THE CALL — and it changed nothing

She left it a long time. Months. And when she came back to it she did it the way she does, which is mid-sentence, from somewhere else.

She was telling me about a leak in the bathroom and the man who came to look at it and then she said: **do you know what happened after the fire?**

I said: he was proved.

She said: yes. And nothing happened.

* * *

She said: for a little while it was glorious. Three days of the city shouting. Gold. Horses. His father weeping on his neck.

And then everybody went back to what they were doing.

She said: and the whispering did not stop. That is the thing nobody tells you about being proved. Sudabeh was still in the palace. She had asked for him and been refused and been humiliated and been publicly caught, and she was still there, at dinner, every night, and she had not been punished because Siavash had asked that she be spared.

She said: so she started again. Quieter this time. Sorcery, in the poem — she hires people, there are potions, there is a business with a dead child that I am not going to describe to you at eleven o'clock at night.

She said: and the court listened. Not because they believed her. Because it was interesting.

* * *

I said: but he walked through a fire.

And my mother said: Ali. Nobody in the history of the world has ever been argued out of a thing they enjoyed believing.

She said: the fire proved he did not do it. It did not stop people saying he did. Those are separate systems and the second one does not care about the first one at all.

* * *

She said: and the worst of it was in his own house.

Because Kavus knew. He had smelled the clothes, he had watched his son ride into two hundred camel-loads of burning wood in a white robe, and he had let him do it, and now he had to sit across a table from him every evening.

She said: a man who has wronged you and knows it is the most dangerous person in your life. Not a man who hates you. A man who owes you and cannot pay.

She said: he started to be able to hardly look at him. And Siavash, who had done nothing, who had been perfect, who had asked for mercy for the woman who tried to destroy him — Siavash started to understand that the price of being right was that his father could not be in a room with him.

* * *

I said something like: so he left?

And she said: not yet. First he did what people do, which is he made himself useful. He volunteered for a war.

She said: which is what young men do when a house has stopped being liveable. They find something enormous and honourable to go

and do somewhere else, and everyone praises them for it, and nobody asks what they are getting away from.

* * *

There was a pause.

She said: is that a siren?

I said: it's an ambulance. There's a hospital four blocks over. You get used to it.

And she said: I don't like that. That you get used to it.

11. THE YEARS — the desert, alone

I went to Joshua Tree by myself in the spring of 2014, in a car I had owned for four months, with a tent I had bought that morning and a cooler with too much in it because I did not know how much a person needs.

I had been in this country four years and I had not once been anywhere without a reason.

That is worth stopping on. Four years of a sequence on a piece of paper — shift, class, shift, sleep — and every single mile I had travelled had been toward an obligation. I did not know how to go somewhere for no reason. It is not a skill you are issued with, where I am from, at least not in the family I am from, and it took me four years to work out that a Saturday was mine.

So I drove east and got there in the afternoon and put up a tent badly and sat on a rock.

* * *

The heat went off the ground at about six and by eight it had dropped twenty degrees and I was in every layer I had brought, which was not enough, because I never bring enough.

And the stars came out.

I had not seen stars like that since I was a boy on a road outside Karaj [ka-RAJ] with my father driving and my brother asleep against the window.

* * *

I sat in the dark with my back against a rock that was still warm from the day, in the middle of a country I had chosen, and I was — I want to use the correct word — *content*. Not happy, exactly. Something quieter and better than happy. Alone, warm on one side and cold on the other, with nobody knowing where I was and nobody needing me anywhere until Monday.

And I noticed, after some indeterminate time, that I was making a noise.

Not singing. Barely audible. A rhythm, under my breath, four beats and a stop, four beats and a stop.

The words were gone. Genuinely gone — I could not have told you what they had been. What was left was the metre. Just the shape of the thing, the way a floor keeps the shape of a table that was moved out of a room years ago.

* * *

I stopped as soon as I noticed.

I did not think: *that is a nowheh* [now-HEH]. I did not think anything at all. I stopped the way you stop biting your nails when you catch yourself, with a small flinch of embarrassment and no examination whatsoever, and then I got the cooler and made something to eat.

There was nobody there to ask me what it was.

I have wondered since whether that was lucky. If somebody had been sitting on that rock with me and said *what's that*, I would have had to say something, and I would have said *nothing, just a song*, and I would have heard myself say it.

Nobody was there. So I did not have to lie, and because I did not have to lie, I did not have to notice.

That is the whole of my twenties in one evening in the desert, and I would not have believed you if you had told me.

* * *

I drove back Sunday afternoon on the 10 with the windows down and thought it had been one of the best weekends of my life.

It had. That is not sarcasm. I want to be clear that I am not building toward the idea that those years were secretly miserable. **They were not.** I was twenty-five and free and doing well and I had a Saturday that belonged to me and stars over a rock, and I earned every part of it, and it was real.

The thing about a door is that it does not stop you living in the house. That is why it stays shut for years.

12. THE CALL — the treaty

She said: he took the war and he was extraordinary at it.

Rostam went with him — that is the detail she loved, that the old man came out of Zabolestan again for him — and the two of them went east and they were unstoppable. Balkh [BALKH] taken. City after city. Siavash was about twenty-two and he was doing, publicly and enormously well, the exact thing he had been raised for.

She said: and Afrasiyab [af-raa-see-YAAB], who was the king of Turan [too-RAAN] and who had been Iran's enemy since before anybody could remember, had a dream.

* * *

She said: it is a real dream and it is worth hearing.

He dreamed of a desert full of snakes and an air full of eagles. He dreamed of a wind that pulled up his tent and turned his banner over. He dreamed of a field of severed heads and a throne with a young man on it who looked at him and said: *why are you doing this, your time is finished.*

He woke up screaming and the room came running.

She said: and he called his advisers and he said, I am going to make peace. Whatever it costs.

* * *

So he sent a hundred hostages.

Not soldiers. Sons. The sons of the hundred best families of Turan, handed over into Siavash's keeping as a guarantee, and with them a message: take these, take the provinces, and let it stop.

And Siavash, who was twenty-two, thought about it and consulted Rostam and accepted.

She said: and everybody who tells this story badly says he was naive.

She said: he was not naive. He got everything. He got the land, he got the hostages, he got the war ended without another dead boy. Any commander in the world would have taken that.

She said: and then he did the thing that killed him, which is that he gave his word.

* * *

She said: do you understand what that meant then?

She said: a hundred young men came into his camp because he had said, with his hand, that they would be safe. They slept in his camp. They ate his food. He knew their names. Some of them were sixteen.

She said: it was not a contract. There was no paper. **The whole thing was that he had said it.**

* * *

I said: and his father hated it.

And she said: we'll get to that.

She said: it's late here. But I'll tell you one thing now so you have it.

And she said: the reason this poem is a thousand years old and we are still telling it is not the fire. It is what happens when a young man is asked to choose between his word and his home.

She said: everybody gets asked that. Not with a hundred hostages. But everybody gets asked.

And then she said: are you sleeping properly? You sound thin.

And I said you can't sound thin, Maman.

And she said: you can.

13. THE YEARS — the phone on a chair

I graduated in the spring of 2015. Twenty-six. Five years from a car wash on Sepulveda to a degree, which is not fast and is not slow and which I did every single day of.

They give you a folding chair in a stadium and it takes four hours and almost all of it is other people's names.

My mother watched it on a telephone.

* * *

Amir flew in from Toronto. That was the arrangement — my mother does not fly, has not since the year I was born, for reasons she has never once explained and I have never once asked about — so my brother came to my graduation as a delegate. My father drove up from Irvine, where he had been since Nowruz, in my aunt's car, in a jacket, and sat four rows behind Amir and did not say one word for four hours, which for him is a medical event.

And Amir did the thing that I did not know I needed and that I have never properly thanked him for.

He propped his phone against a water bottle on the empty seat beside him, on a video call, for four hours, so that our mother could sit in a kitchen in Elahieh at four in the morning and watch a stadium in the San Fernando Valley from an angle that mostly showed the back of a stranger's head.

Four hours. She did not go to bed. When they finally got to the S names Amir picked the phone up and held it over the crowd and I

could hear her, from about forty metres away, over eleven thousand people, doing the thing that women from where I am from do at weddings.

She said afterwards that she saw me. I have watched that footage. You cannot see me. There is a man in a gown who might be anybody.

She saw me.

* * *

Afterwards we ate in a Persian place in Tarzana because Amir wanted to and I did not, and he was right and I was wrong, and the three of us sat in a booth with the phone propped against the sugar and had dinner with our mother, who had not slept, at nine in the morning her time, with a cup of tea, in a kitchen I could see the corner of.

She said: is that *khoresh* — and then, in English, for the waiter's benefit, though the waiter was in Tarzana and had not needed English for the last decade: is that the good one?

Amir said: it's the good one.

She said: Ali jan. Say something.

And I could not think of anything at all, and I said: I did it.

And she said: I know, my love. I was there.

* * *

Here is a small thing that I have kept.

My father paid. He made a performance of the bill that Amir still does at parties. He folded the receipt into his shirt pocket, which I noticed, and thought nothing of.

At some point in that dinner my father went outside — to take a call, or to make one, or to stand on Ventura Boulevard with a toothpick and look at the traffic, which is a thing he does — and Amir went with him, and my mother said, in the two minutes we had alone, in a completely ordinary voice:

She said: he was unbearable today, wasn't he. He told the waiter. I could hear him telling the waiter through a telephone.

She said: Kamran [kam-RAAN] Shabani [sha-baa-NEE], whose son has a degree. He'll have it in a conversation about parking by Tuesday.

And then she said: you know that, don't you.

I said yes.

She said: I know you do. I like saying it.

14. THE CALL — the letter

She said: are you sitting down?

I said: you always ask me that and you have never once waited for the answer.

She said: sit down.

* * *

She said: Siavash had done everything right.

He had ended a war. He had taken the provinces. He had a hundred hostages in his camp, alive and safe and fed, from the best families of the other side. He had written to his father to tell him it was finished.

She said: and the letter came back.

She said: and I want you to understand that the letter was not angry. It was worse than angry, Ali. It was a father being *disappointed*.

* * *

The letter said: kill them.

It said: send them to me and I will do it, or do it there, it does not matter. There is no peace with that country. You are young and you have been fooled. Burn what you have taken, kill the hostages, and come home.

She said: and there it is. That is all of it. That is what this poem is about, and everybody thinks it is about a fire.

She said: **a young man is told, by the person he most wants to be loved by, that the price of coming home is his own word.**

* * *

There was a silence on the line then. It was costing money and neither of us said anything.

She said: he wrote back and said no.

She said: he said, I gave my hand on it. They came to me under my hand. I will not.

And she said: and that was the door closing. He was twenty-two years old standing in a camp in a foreign country and he had just found out that home was conditional and that he could not meet the condition.

* * *

She said: he did not do anything wrong, Ali. I am always careful about this because the story is very old and people tell it badly.

He did not sin. He did not rebel. He did not choose adventure.

He kept his word, exactly as he had been raised to, and it turned out that the man who raised him did not mean it.

* * *

She said: so he sent the hostages back to their own families, with an escort, unharmed. He sent the army home to his father with a general in charge of it. He kept about three hundred men who chose to stay.

And then he sat down and thought about where a person goes.

And she said the line, gently, at eleven at night her time:

He went to the enemy. Because they had not lied to him yet.

* * *

I did not say anything for long enough that she said my name.

I said: I'm here. It's the room, there's an echo.

There was no echo.

She said: all right.

She said: shall I stop?

And I said no. Too fast. I said: no, keep going.

And she did. And I stood in a kitchen in a country that had taken me in and listened to my mother tell me about a young man riding away from everything he came from, with three hundred men, in good faith, toward people who were kind to him for a while.

* * *

She said: I'll do the rest another time. It's late. Are you eating?

I said yes.

She said: Ali jan.

I said: yes.

She said: I'm proud of you. You know that.

15. THE YEARS — the first thing with my name on it

I need to say what I do, because I have been avoiding it for fourteen chapters the way I avoided it at parties for about six years.

I make things for other people's buildings.

That is the short version and it is the one I gave strangers for a long time. The longer version is that I ended up in a small studio in Frogtown that does interpretive design — museums, mostly, and civic spaces, and occasionally a lobby for somebody with money who wants the lobby to say something. You are given a room and a subject and a budget and you have to decide what a person is going to understand, in what order, in the eleven minutes they will actually spend there.

Sequence. Pacing. What you show first. What you withhold until the third panel. How long to stay inside one small thing before you move.

I was extremely good at it almost immediately and I told everybody it was luck.

* * *

The first job that was mine was in 2016 and it was small — a single room in a county historical society about ninety minutes out, about a labour dispute in the nineteen-twenties that had ended badly.

And what I did with it, which was apparently unusual, was I refused to put the outcome in the first room.

The client wanted the deaths on the entry panel because the deaths are what the room is about. And I said no. I said you put them in and you have told everybody how to feel before they have met anybody. Give me the whole first wall for the men. Names, hours, what they were paid, what a shift was, what they ate. Make somebody stand there for four minutes with people who are alive.

Then the second wall.

They ran it. It won a small regional award that nobody outside the field has heard of and I have the certificate in a drawer and I know exactly where the drawer is.

* * *

Diane Okafor came to the opening. She had retired by then. She stood in that first room for a long time and then she said: you built it like a piece of music.

And I said thank you.

She said: where did you learn to withhold like that?

And I said: I don't know. I just do it.

That is the second time somebody asked me that question and the second time I said nothing, and I gave exactly the same answer,

five years apart, in the same tone, and I did not notice that I had said it before.

* * *

What I did not say, because I did not know it, was: I learned it from a man on a microphone in a yard in south Tehran who would sit on a low note four times and refuse to give you the high one until the whole room was leaning.

I learned it from a dead man.

I have built a career on a technique I inherited by watching somebody, and I did not find that out until I was thirty-three, and when I did find out I had already been paid for it for six years.

16. THE CALL — the country that was kind

She said: this is the part nobody tells.

She said: everyone knows the fire and everyone knows the ending and the middle is thrown away, and the middle is seven years long.

* * *

He crossed the river. That is the moment. He rode over the border into the country his own people had been at war with since before anyone could remember, with three hundred men, and he was met.

Afrasiyab came out to meet him personally, which for a king was enormous, and put his arms around him and wept.

She said: and I do not think he was lying. That is the part that makes this a good poem instead of a simple one. Afrasiyab had had a dream about a young man on a throne telling him his time was finished, and here was the young man, at his gate, with nothing, asking for shelter — and he embraced him and meant it.

She said: people can be genuinely kind to you and it can still end the way it ends. Both things.

* * *

She said: he gave him everything.

A province. Horses. A place at his right hand. He watched him play chess and lost and laughed about it. He watched him ride at the polo and could not believe what he was seeing. He gave him his daughter.

Her name was Farangis [fa-raan-GEES], and Ferdowsi does something with her that he almost never does with a woman in that poem, which is that he lets her be *right*. She is not decoration. She sees what is coming before anybody, she says so out loud, and she is not listened to.

She said: and they were happy.

She said it flatly. She said: I want you to hear that properly because it is not a device. **They were happy.** Seven years. A marriage that worked. A child coming. He was twenty-three when he crossed and he was thirty when it ended and in between he had the only settled years of his life, in a foreign country, among people who were not his.

* * *

I said: he never went home.

And she said: no. And that is not the tragedy either.

She said: the tragedy is not that he was in exile. Plenty of people are in exile and are fine. He built a life. He was loved. He was *good* at it.

She said: the tragedy is that he was in a place where nothing that had happened to him could be explained.

She said: nobody in that country had been at the fire. Nobody had smelled the clothes. Nobody had read the letter. He was surrounded by people who were kind to him and knew none of it, and he could not tell them, because how do you tell a Turanian that your own father asked you to cut a hundred Turanian boys' throats and you refused?

She said: so he did not say it. To anybody. For seven years.

* * *

I was standing at a window in Frogtown at nine in the evening and I said: Maman, I have to go, I've got a thing in the morning.

And she said: all right, my love.

And she said: Ali.

And I said yes.

And she said: nothing. Go on. I'll call Sunday.

17. THE YEARS — I was happy

I am going to spend a chapter on this because if I do not, the rest of the book will read as though I was building toward something, and I was not. I was living.

It is 2016. I am twenty-seven. Here is the inventory.

* * *

A one-bedroom in Frogtown with a lemon tree in the yard that belonged to the building and that I picked from anyway. Rent I could afford. A car that started.

Work I was good at and that mattered a small amount to a small number of people, which is the correct size for work to matter. I could look at a room and know what a stranger would understand in it, and in what order, and I got paid for that.

Money in an account for the first time in my life. Not much. Enough that a bad month was a bad month and not a catastrophe, which is a distinction that people who have always had it cannot feel.

A group of about nine people who I saw regularly and who saw me. Not friends the way I had understood the word at fifteen — nobody in that group would have gone to prison for me. But they knew what I did and remembered my mother's name and one of them noticed when I shaved my head and said it suited me.

And, for a few months of most years, a father in a lawn chair in Irvine, forty miles south, who could not fit into any apartment I have ever rented and whom I drove down to on the odd Sunday and said nothing to that either of us would remember, and who is barely in this book because he has one of his own.

Sunday mornings. A bakery on Fletcher. Running badly, three times a week, in a park, listening to nothing.

And a thing I did every year in October which was to go to the ocean by myself and stand in it up to the knees for about ten minutes, which I started for no reason and did for eight consecutive years and have never told anybody about until this sentence.

* * *

I want to be extremely clear.

I was happy.

Not managing. Not coping. Not building a life around an absence. Happy, in the plain and unremarkable way that most people are happy for stretches of years, and I knew I was, at the time, in the moment, which is rarer than being happy.

I had done what I set out to do at twenty-one standing at an airport barrier with a bag while three hundred people met somebody else. I had made a life out of nothing, alone, in a language I had learned properly on a bus, and there was no part of it I had been given.

That is the thing that makes what comes later possible. Not the misery. **The competence.**

A man who is falling apart gets found. A man who is doing extremely well does not, because there is nothing to find, and everybody around him has excellent evidence that he is fine, and so does he.

* * *

My mother said, on the phone in that year: you sound settled.

And I said I am.

And she said: good. That's all I wanted.

And then, after a moment, in the tone she uses when she is putting something down on a table between us rather than handing it to me:

She said: you were such a serious little boy. You have no idea. You'd sit on the step of the building with your chin on your hands like a man waiting for a bus that was late.

She said: I used to think, what is he thinking about. And I'd ask, and you'd say *nothing*.

She said: and I believed you. That's the part. You were four and I believed you.

18. THE CALL — the city he built

She said: he built a city.

She said it the way you would announce a birth.

* * *

Afrasiyab gave him land — a whole province, out toward the east — and Siavash went there and did not sit in it. He built.

She said: two cities. The first one was called Gang Dezh [GANG DEZH], the fortress-town, and the second one was **Siavashgerd** [see-yaa-vash-GERD], which just means the place Siavash made, and Ferdowsi spends real time on it, which he almost never does.

Gardens. Watercourses. A palace with painted rooms — and this is the part my mother could not get through without stopping — he had them paint the walls of that palace with the kings of Iran. His own family. His father. The whole line, in a hall, in a foreign country, painted by Turanian craftsmen who had never seen any of them.

She said: he built a room to be homesick in.

* * *

I said: that's a lot for a man who was fine.

And she said: he *was* fine. That's what I keep saying to you. He was fine and he painted his father on a wall in another country. Both.

* * *

She said: and Farangis wanted a child, and everybody knew it.

And she said: and this is where it starts, and it starts with somebody visiting.

Afrasiyab sent his own brother to see the new city. A man called **Garsivaz** [gar-see-VAAZ].

And Garsivaz arrived and was shown around. The gardens, the watercourses, the painted hall. The polo ground. The people, who liked him. The wife, who was the king's daughter. A child talked about.

She said: and Ferdowsi tells you exactly what happened inside that man in one line. He says: *his heart filled with envy*.

That is all. No plot yet, no scheme. A man walked around a beautiful place that a younger man had made and something turned over in him, and he went home with it.

* * *

She said: I want you to understand how ordinary this is.

She said: Sudabeh needed a whole apparatus. Sorcery, a hired woman, a dead child, a public accusation. All of it failed. He walked out of a mountain of fire without a mark.

She said: Garsivaz needed nothing at all. He needed to be believed slightly, by one person, over a long period.

She said: **the fire could not touch him and a man talking quietly at dinner killed him in eighteen months.**

* * *

I said: what did he say?

And she said: small things. Always small. That is the technique and it has not changed in a thousand years. He never said *Siavash is plotting*. He said things that were true and arranged them badly. He said, the men love him. He said, they say his name before yours in that province. He said, he writes letters. He said, he is your enemy's son and he has your daughter and a child coming and an army that likes him and a city with your rivals painted on the wall.

Every single one of those was true.

She said: he did not lie once, Ali. He just chose what to mention.

* * *

I was in the kitchen in Frogtown with the window open and I said:
that's —

And I did not finish it, because I did not have the end of the
sentence.

She said: what?

I said: nothing. Someone's dog.

She said: all right, my love.

She said: I'll do the rest another time. It gets bad now.

PART THREE — PREFERENCES

19. THE YEARS — I left a wedding

It was 2017 and it was somebody from work and it was in a hotel in Pasadena and I had been looking forward to it for a month.

I was fine through the ceremony and fine through the dinner and fine for the first part of the dancing, which I do badly and enjoy anyway.

And then they did the thing they do at those weddings, which is that everybody got in a circle and put their arms around each other's shoulders and began to move together, side to side, on the beat, all at the same time.

Maybe sixty people.

* * *

I got out of the circle.

I did it politely, with the face you make — *bathroom* — and I went out through the lobby and stood in the parking structure for about twenty minutes.

My heart rate was, I would estimate, a hundred and forty. My hands were wet. There was a very specific thing happening in my chest that I would describe as a machine trying to start.

And I stood between two cars in a parking structure in Pasadena and I thought, with complete sincerity: *I really do not like crowds.*

* * *

I want to sit inside that sentence for a second because it is the most useful thing in this book.

It was not a lie. I was not concealing anything from myself in any sense that a psychologist would recognise. I had a physical event, I looked for a cause, I found one that fitted perfectly well and was socially available and required nothing from me, and I filed it.

I don't like crowds. Thousands of people don't. Nobody has ever once been asked to justify it.

I used that sentence for nine years — I had been using it since 2012, it turned out; the wedding was only the first time I heard myself. I used it on my mother. I used it at a work thing in 2018 and a man said *me neither* and we had a nice conversation about it.

* * *

Here is what I know now that I did not know then, and it is not dramatic and there was no way for me to have found it out.

It was not the crowd. I have been in enormous crowds and been fine. I have been at a concert with fourteen thousand people and had the time of my life.

It was the unison. It was sixty people moving at the same time on the same beat with their arms on each other's shoulders.

That is a different thing entirely, and there is no word for it in English, and so for nine years I used the nearest available word and it was the wrong one.

That is how it works. You do not get a locked door with a sign on it. You get a slightly wrong word that fits well enough, and then you build a personality on top of it, and the personality is load-bearing and completely sincere.

* * *

I went back in after twenty minutes and had a good night and got home at two and thought nothing about it at all.

I want that in the record.

Thought nothing about it at all.

20. THE CALL — the man at dinner

She did not come back to it for two months and when she did she started somewhere I did not expect.

She said: do you know what happened to Sudabeh in the end?

I said no.

She said: nothing. She is barely mentioned again. She does one enormous evil thing, it fails completely, and then she is furniture until somebody kills her offstage years later.

She said: that is Ferdowsi being honest. The person who tries hardest to destroy him is not the one who does it.

* * *

She said: Garsivaz went home and worked for eighteen months.

She said: and I want to describe the method properly because you will meet it.

He did not accuse. He *withheld and implied*. He would come back from the east and say very little, and when the king asked how it was, he would say it was fine, and pause slightly too long, and change the subject.

She said: a pause is not a lie. Nobody can hold you to a pause.

She said: and Afrasiyab, who had loved that boy, who had come out to the border and put his arms around him and wept — Afrasiyab started to sleep badly.

* * *

She said: and then Garsivaz did the second half, which is the part that made me put the book down when I was nineteen.

He went east again. And he went to Siavash and he said: *be careful. The king is turning against you.*

She said: he ran it from both ends. He made the king afraid of the boy and the boy afraid of the king, and then all he had to do was let the two of them behave normally.

She said: because a frightened man's ordinary behaviour looks exactly like guilt. Siavash started keeping his men closer. Perfectly reasonable. And Garsivaz reported it.

* * *

I said: did nobody see it?

And she said: Farangis saw it. She saw all of it. She told him.

She said: she said to him — she was pregnant, she was the king's daughter, she knew that court — she said, do not go to my father. Whatever the letter says, do not go.

She said: and he went.

* * *

I said: why?

And my mother was quiet for a moment and then she said the thing that I did not understand for another four years:

She said: **because he had spent his whole life being able to prove he was innocent, and he had never once considered that it might not help.**

She said: he thought if he stood in front of the man and explained it, it would be all right. He had walked through a fire. He had a system, my love. And the system had worked once, spectacularly, in front of a whole city, and he had never noticed that afterwards nothing changed.

* * *

She said: how are you sleeping?

I said fine.

She said: you always say fine.

I said because I'm always fine.

And she laughed and said: that is exactly what your father says. Every day. In writing.

21. THE YEARS — the playlist

I have a playlist called **slow** and it has about ninety things on it and I made it in 2017 and I still use it.

It is what I put on in the car, at work, running, cooking. People have commented on it. A woman I dated briefly in 2018 said my

music taste was *very deliberate*, which she meant as an observation and which I took as a compliment.

I built it over about a year by removing things.

* * *

Here is how the removing worked, and I did not describe it this way at the time because I did not have this way to describe it.

Something would come on and I would not enjoy it. Not *dislike* — that is too strong and too conscious. I would notice a small unpleasantness, a slight leaning-away, and I would skip it. And after a while I would stop putting that artist on. And after a longer while the whole area would quietly close.

Anything with a four-on-the-floor kick at a certain speed. Anything with a hand-clap on the two and the four at a certain speed. Anything in a gym. Most dance music of any era. Two entire decades of Iranian pop that my brother loves and that my mother had in the car when I was small.

I told people I liked things slow. I told people I found that stuff *exhausting*. I said the word *exhausting* a great many times over nine years and I believed it every time.

* * *

In 2021, after everything, I sat down at a table with a tap-tempo app and went through the playlist properly, because by then I needed to know.

The playlist averages ninety-four beats per minute. Nothing on it goes above a hundred and eighteen.

And the things I had removed — the things I could not be in a room with, the things that made me leave a gym and cancel a membership I had paid for — sat, almost without exception, between about a hundred and twenty-five and a hundred and thirty-five.

* * *

There is a number in the middle of that range and I am not going to write it again in this chapter because I have written it enough for one lifetime, and because the point is not that I avoided one number.

The point is that a man built a nine-year aesthetic preference out of a window about ten beats wide, told everybody it was taste, and was so convincing about it that he convinced himself, and that the whole thing was completely invisible from the inside and would have stayed invisible for the rest of his life if a nineteen-year-old had not looked at him in a garage in Highland Park.

* * *

I want to say one more thing about the playlist and it is the part that I find hardest.

It is a good playlist.

It is genuinely, actually good. People ask me for it. I have given it to about eleven people. There is nothing wrong with any of the ninety things on it and I love them and I chose them and they are mine.

The door does not make you worse. That is what nobody says. It just quietly decides some things for you, and the things it decides are usually fine, and you get to keep the credit.

22. THE CALL — she stopped

She stopped for two years.

I do not think she did it deliberately. I want to be careful there, because it would be very easy for me, from here, to build my mother into somebody who was managing me, and she was not. She was a woman of sixty in Tehran with a bad knee and a leaking bathroom and a son eleven thousand kilometres away.

But she stopped, and I noticed, and I never once said anything.

* * *

She had left it at Garsivaz. At the man talking quietly at dinner and the letters going both ways.

And after that the calls kept coming — Sundays, mostly, plus the four in the mornings — and they were about the knee, and the bathroom, and Mrs Kazemi's daughter, and whether I was eating. All the ordinary machinery of a mother and a son on two continents.

And every so often I would say: what happened after that?

And she would say: oh, it's grim. I'll do it when I'm in the mood.

* * *

Twice she started and stopped.

Once she got as far as the letter — Afrasiyab's letter summoning him — and then said, actually, no, not tonight, I've had a day.

And once, in the winter of 2018, she got further. She got him onto the horse. She got him riding out with three hundred men to go and explain himself to a man who had already decided.

And then she said: he took the road along the river.

And there was a pause of about four seconds and then she said, in a completely different voice: did I tell you the Kazemis are thinking of selling?

* * *

I let her.

That is the whole of my part in this. I let her, for two years, without ever once saying *Maman, why do you keep stopping*.

And I have gone round and round on why I did that, and the honest answer is not noble. It is not that I was being gentle with her.

It is that **I did not want the end of the story either.**

I have never been able to work out how much of that was for her sake. I would like to report that it was mostly for her sake. I do not think it was.

* * *

She came back to it in 2021. Once, at the end, all in one go, and she did it because I asked her to, and I asked her because by then I had to.

But there were two years in the middle where a woman in Elahieh and a man in Frogtown both quietly agreed not to get to the part where the young man dies, and neither of us ever mentioned the agreement, and I am not sure either of us knew we had made one.

That is the most Iranian thing in this book.

23. THE YEARS — the interview

The interview was in 2019 in a federal building downtown and it took eleven minutes and I had prepared for it for four months.

The officer was a man in his fifties with a very clean desk. He was not unkind. I want to say that clearly because there is a version of this story that people expect and it is not what happened. He was professional, slightly bored, and entirely reasonable.

He asked me the questions. I answered them. My file was in good order because I had spent nine years making sure my file was in good order.

* * *

And then he asked me to sign something and I put my hand out for the pen.

And he stopped.

Not dramatically. He looked at my hand on his desk for perhaps a second and a half longer than a person looks at a hand.

Then he wrote something. Two words, maybe three. On a form, in a box, with a government pen.

And then he said: *any history of self-harm?*

* * *

I said no.

He said: all right. And he moved on and I signed the thing and eleven minutes later I was in an elevator.

* * *

Here is what I want to describe, because it is the closest this book comes to a crime and no crime occurred.

He was doing his job. There is a box. It is there for good reasons, put there by people trying to help. A man came in with two matched scars across both palms, of a kind that is genuinely, statistically associated with one particular thing, and the officer noticed it, and asked, and recorded the answer.

He did everything correctly.

And I said no, which was true, and which he wrote down, and which will now sit in a file in this country forever next to two words I did not read and cannot request.

* * *

I could have explained.

That is the thing. There was no rule against it. He would probably have listened. It would have taken ninety seconds.

I fell forward onto a blade lying on wet concrete during a scuffle in a yard in Tehran when I was fifteen.

And then he would have said: what were you doing in the yard?

And there it is. That is the whole architecture. **You cannot tell the small true thing without the large true thing behind it**, and the large true thing was a banned rite and eleven men in a yard and a name that forty families in south Tehran have spent twenty years not saying.

So I said no.

I have said no to that question, in one form or another, to a doctor, to a nurse, to a physiotherapist, twice to women, once to a man at a

pool, and every single time it was true, and every single time it was the least honest thing I have ever said.

* * *

I got citizenship in 2020. My mother cried on the phone. Amir sent something ridiculous. My father, who had had the same passport in a drawer for fifteen years and never once used it for anything but a stamp, said nothing for a while, and then said: good, now they can't send you back either. Which was a joke, and was not. I framed nothing and I told nobody at work for a fortnight and I could not have told you why.

24. THE YEARS — what my uncle said

My uncle Mehran [meh-RAAN] died in the winter of 1387, which is 2009, which was fourteen months before I left.

He died of his lungs, which had been killing him since 1366, which is to say he died of an afternoon in a marsh at twenty years old over the following twenty-one years, on an instalment plan, in a country that had given him a medal for it.

Eleven days at the end. I was there for all of them and I am not going to write about it here.

* * *

But there is a thing he said and I need to put it down now, in its correct place, in the middle of a chapter about ordinary memory, because that is exactly how I carried it for twelve years.

It was day eight or nine. He was on the oxygen and he had gone past the point of arranging things, which is the point where people say what they actually have.

I was on a chair. He said my name.

And then he said: **you were at the corner.**

I said what?

And he said — and it took him a while, it always took him a while — he said: with the baker's boy. You were at the corner.

I said I don't know what you mean.

And he said: no.

And then he said, after a long pause: good.

* * *

That is it. That is the whole thing.

A dying man said eleven words to a twenty-year-old and the twenty-year-old assumed he was confused, because he was on morphine and had been talking about the reeds for two days, and because *you were at the corner* is not information, it is a fragment.

I did not ask him what he meant. He died two days later.

* * *

I have thought about *good* more than about anything else anybody has ever said to me.

He said *no* — and then he said *good*.

He asked me if I knew, I said I did not, and he was **relieved**.

At the time I did not register it as relief. I registered it as an old man agreeing with me. That is what *good* sounds like when you have no idea what the question was.

* * *

I want to note something about the shape of that memory, because it is the whole of this book.

I did not repress it. I have never forgotten it. I could have told you about it at any point in the last twelve years — I told a colleague about it once, in 2018, as an anecdote about how strange people get at the end.

It sat in the open, completely available, meaning nothing, for twelve years.

That is what a door actually looks like. Not a locked room. A thing on the shelf in the hall that you walk past four thousand times and dust and never once pick up, because there is no reason to,

because it is just an object, because nobody has ever told you what it is.

25. THE CALL — the letter that came the other way

She did it in pieces that year, out of order, which is not how she does anything.

She said: I'll give you a bit.

She said: Afrasiyab wrote to him. Come and see me. Nothing in the letter was wrong. It was warm. It said, we have not seen each other, bring your wife, my daughter, I want to see the child.

She said: and Garsivaz had already been to Siavash and told him the king was turning. And Garsivaz had already been to the king and let him understand that the boy was building something.

She said: so the letter arrived at a young man who had been prepared for two years to read it the wrong way. And he read it the wrong way. And then he behaved as a frightened man behaves, and every single thing he did after that confirmed the story.

She said: that is the technique, Ali. You do not need to make anybody do anything. You just make sure that when they behave normally, it looks like the thing you said.

* * *

I said: so he went.

And she said: not yet. He tried to leave first.

She said: he wrote to his father — to Kavus, after everything, after the letter about the hostages, after seven years — and he asked to come home.

There was a pause.

She said: and Kavus said yes.

And she said: and the letter took too long.

* * *

I said: that's —

She said: I know.

She said: that is the cruellest sentence in the poem and it is four words long. **The letter took too long.** He asked, and he was forgiven, and there was a road between them, and the road had a length.

* * *

She said: enough. That's enough of that.

She said: how's the knee — no, I'm the one with the knee. How's your back? You lift things.

26. THE YEARS — the balcony

Amir came in the spring of 2019, which was the second of the two times we saw each other in eleven years.

He was thirty-four and he had a mortgage and a daughter and he had put on the specific fourteen pounds that men from our family put on at that age, and he was still, infuriatingly, the best-looking person in any room he walked into.

He stayed four nights. We did the things. Our father drove up from Irvine for two of them and took us somewhere on Westwood Boulevard that belongs in a different book. We took Amir's daughter to the aquarium in Long Beach, which neither of us noticed the significance of until my mother pointed it out on the phone afterwards and then we both went quiet.

* * *

The third night we were on the balcony at about one in the morning.

He was drinking. I was not, particularly. The lemon tree was doing whatever it does at night.

And we talked about our father for a while, which we can do now, in a way we could not until we were about thirty — the shape of him, in a lawn chair forty miles from where we were sitting, the way he laughed with no sound, the fact that neither of us had

managed one real sentence with him in two evenings and both of us were pretending it was the traffic.

And then Amir said, looking out at the street and not at me:

He said: do you ever think about the yard?

* * *

I want to describe what happened in my body, because it was not fear.

It was **housekeeping**.

Something in me went through a set of doors very quickly and quietly, checked that they were shut, and reported back. Two seconds, maybe less. No alarm, no adrenaline, nothing a doctor would find.

And then I said: not really.

And he said: no. Me neither.

And that was it.

* * *

He was giving me the door, and he was giving it to me at one in the morning on a balcony with a drink in his hand, which is the only way my brother has ever been able to give anybody anything.

He was not asking me to explain my hands. He has never once asked me about my hands. He was asking whether I still went there, in my head, and he was asking because he was worried about me and had been for fifteen years and did not have any other way to say it.

And I said *not really*, which was true, which is the terrible part.

I did not lie to my brother on that balcony. I genuinely did not think about the yard. That is what the whole apparatus is *for*.

* * *

He went to bed about twenty minutes later.

And I sat out there for another hour with a lemon tree and thought about nothing much at all, and slept well, and drove him to LAX two days later, and we hugged at the kerb the way we do, badly, twice, and he said *ghorboonet beram* [ghor-BOO-net be-RAM] — which is a thing our mother says and which means, more or less, *may I be sacrificed for you*, and which nobody in our family has ever been able to say without making it a joke.

And I drove home on the 105 and that was the closest anybody has ever come.

27. THE YEARS — the addresses

There are, depending on how you count, somewhere between eleven and twenty places in greater Los Angeles where the ten nights are observed.

I know where nine of them are.

* * *

I did not seek that out. I want to be clear that at no point did I sit down and research it. It accumulated. You live in a city with the largest Iranian population outside Iran and things reach you — a flyer in a grocery on Westwood, a man at a wedding mentioning his heyat in the Valley, a Persian radio station in a taxi in August, a WhatsApp forward from a cousin of Farhad's that I never opened and never deleted.

By 2019 I could have told you the address of a hall behind a carpet showroom in Northridge, a mosque in Pomona, a house in Encino where about forty men go, and the big one, the one everybody knows, off Sepulveda.

I could have driven to any of them from my apartment in under an hour.

I never went. Not once in eleven years. Not to look, not to stand at the back, not to drive past on the tenth and keep going.

* * *

And here is what I want to put down, because it is the strangest fact in this entire book:

I never once decided not to.

There was no decision. There was no evening on which I thought about going and elected not to. There was no year in which I said *maybe next year*. There was no resistance, because there was nothing to resist — the question never came up.

Eleven Muharrams [mo-har-RAM] went past in a city I lived in, in a country where I was free, at a distance of forty minutes, and the matter simply never arose in my mind at all.

* * *

Compare that with what I *did* do.

I cooked the food. I made gheimeh [ghey-MEH] four or five times a year and got good at it and had people over for it and told them what was in it.

I explained Muharram to Americans. Repeatedly. Well. I have given a version of that explanation perhaps thirty times at dinner tables — the thirst, the river, the tenth day, the reason a thing stays open for thirteen hundred years — and I gave it beautifully, and people were moved by it, and one man in 2018 said it was the most interesting thing he'd heard all year.

I have talked about it more than almost any Iranian I know here.

I have simply never been in the room.

* * *

That is not avoidance. Avoidance has a shape and you can feel its edges. I could talk about the tenth day for forty minutes and drive home on the 101 past an exit I knew perfectly well led to a hall where four hundred people were doing it that night, and feel nothing at all, and think about my parking.

I was not hiding from it.

I had it. I owned it. I performed it, competently, for an audience, several times a year.

I had turned the whole of it into material.

28. THE CALL — the one I made

In February 2021 my mother had a small stroke.

She was sixty-two. It happened in the kitchen in the morning and she was on the floor for about forty minutes before Mrs Kazemi came up, and the outcome was as good as those outcomes get — some weakness on the right, some trouble with certain words for about three weeks, and then most of it back.

I found out by text from a cousin because she had told them not to call me until they knew. My father, who was in Irvine that month, rang me twenty minutes after the text, having found out the way he finds out everything about my mother, which is that she had not answered him for a whole morning, and he could not get a sentence out, and rang back an hour later and could.

* * *

That is the only time in eleven years I have been genuinely, physically frightened.

I have described a lot of things in this book as though I felt nothing, and it is accurate. That morning I sat on the floor of a bathroom in Frogtown with a phone in my hand and could not stand up for a while.

Everything I had built — the account, the citizenship, the studio, the certificate in a drawer — resolved instantly into one fact, which is that I was eleven thousand kilometres away and there was a flight and I could not take it and get back in, not that year, not with what was happening at the borders, and that if it had gone the other way I would have watched it on a telephone.

The way she watched me graduate.

* * *

I called her four days later when she could talk.

And she said, slowly, and I could hear her choosing the words like a woman going up stairs:

She said: I'm all right. Don't do the voice.

I said what voice.

She said: that one.

* * *

And then she said — and this was three weeks in, on a later call, when the words had come back — she said something I have not been able to put down anywhere else.

She said: I was on the floor and I could see under the fridge.

She said: there was a bottle cap under there and I remember thinking, that has been there since Amir was at school.

She said: and then I thought about you, and I thought — and she stopped, and I let her have it — I thought, *he's going to find out from somebody else*.

She said: that was the worst part. Not the floor. That.

* * *

I said: Maman.

And she said: it's fine. Mrs Kazemi came.

And then she said, in a completely different voice, the practical one:

She said: I want to finish the story.

I said what?

She said: Siavash. I never finished it. I've been not finishing it for two years and we both know it.

She said: I'd like to do it properly. Not tonight.

She said: but I don't want to leave it like that.

PART FOUR — THE GAZE

29. THE YEARS — Highland Park

I met Reza [re-ZAA] in April 2021 in a garage behind a house in Highland Park that four people were using as a workshop.

I had gone because a woman from the studio was building something and needed a second pair of hands on a Saturday, and there were maybe eight people there, and one of them was nineteen and very tall and very quiet and did not appear to be doing anything.

He was born in Glendale. His parents came in the eighties. He had about forty words of Persian, all of them domestic, and he pronounced his own name the American way and then corrected himself when I said it, which is a thing I have watched a hundred people do here and which never stops being sad.

* * *

He asked me what I did and I told him, and he asked a follow-up question that was better than the ones adults ask.

He said: how do you know what to leave out?

I said: you don't, at first. You put everything in and then you take things away until it starts to hurt, and then you put one thing back.

And he did something that I registered at the time as nothing at all.

He wrote it down.

Not on his phone. On the back of his hand, with a pen off the bench, while I was still talking.

* * *

I saw him five or six times over the next two months.

He would turn up where I was. Not in a way that felt like anything — a group thing, an opening, a lunch after a workshop day. Once he came to a talk I gave at a college in Pasadena, forty minutes each way on a bus, and stood at the back and did not ask a question and left before I could say hello.

He started using my sentences. I noticed it the third time. It was not mimicry exactly; it was that a thing I had said about pacing came out of his mouth two weeks later in a slightly better form, and he did not know he was doing it, and I found it enormously flattering and did not examine that for a second.

He asked me what to read. I gave him a list. He read all of it. He came back with the list annotated and disagreed with me about two of them, correctly.

* * *

I liked him.

I want that on the record before any of the rest of it, because everything that happened after has made it very hard for me to say that simply.

I liked him. He was nineteen and serious and slightly lost and much cleverer than he had been told, and he had the specific hunger of a kid who has finally met somebody doing the thing he did not know was a thing you could do.

I was thirty-two and I had built a whole life alone and there was a nineteen-year-old writing on his hand while I talked.

* * *

Here is what I told myself about it at the time, and I told myself this consciously, in words, more than once:

Somebody did this for me once.

I meant Diane Okafor. Four hundred words on the back of a two-page paper. A woman who remembered my name in the second week.

That is who I thought I was being.

30. THE YEARS — the look

It was the fourth of June 2021, in the same garage, at about nine at night.

We had finished the thing we were doing. There were four of us left and somebody had put beer in a bucket and the roll door was up and it was that specific hour in Los Angeles in June when the day has finally let go and the air is exactly the temperature of a person.

And I was talking.

* * *

I do not remember what about. I have tried. It was probably work, because it usually was, and I was probably being good at it, because I usually was.

I know that I did the thing I do, which is to build slowly and hold something back and then give it, and I know that I did it well, because I could feel the small change in the room that tells you it landed. I have been able to feel that since I was fifteen years old. I have never once had to learn it.

And I looked up mid-sentence, the way you do, and Reza was looking at me.

* * *

I am going to describe the expression as precisely as I can, and the fact that I can describe it this precisely is the entire problem.

His mouth was slightly open. Not much. Enough that the lower lip had come away.

His head was tilted maybe four or five degrees. Not forward — *up*, very slightly, which is what a person does when they are looking at something above them, and I was sitting on a stool at the same height as him.

His hands were completely still on his knees. That was the thing. Everybody else in that garage was doing something with their hands. His were dead still, palms down.

And his eyes were not tracking. They were not moving between my eyes and my mouth the way a listener's eyes move. They were fixed on one point, which I think was the middle of my face, and they

were not really looking at me at all. They were looking at something I represented.

* * *

And I lost the sentence.

Completely. Mid-clause. I stopped, and somebody laughed and said something, and I said sorry, lost my thread, and picked it up about four words back and finished it, and it was fine, and nobody thought anything of it.

I went out to the car about twenty minutes later.

* * *

I sat in the driver's seat in the dark on a residential street in Highland Park and did not start the engine for a long time.

Because the thing that had happened was not that a young man looked at me admiringly.

The thing that had happened was that I **recognised** it.

Not *understood*. Not *identified*. Recognised, the way you recognise a smell, from the inside, instantly, before language.

I knew that face. I knew the exact tilt of it and the exact stillness of the hands and the exact way the eyes stop tracking, and I knew it with a completeness that you can only have about a face **you have made**.

* * *

I had made that face. Somewhere. At somebody.

And I could not, sitting in that car on the fourth of June 2021, tell you where or when or at whom.

I could tell you the temperature. I could tell you that it was cold and that my hands were cold and that there was a smell of something burning and that I was looking up.

That was all I had. Cold, and up, and burning.

I drove home and made something to eat and went to bed and slept badly for the first time in about nine years.

31. THE YEARS — the body

It came in pieces over the following six weeks and it never once came as a picture.

That is the thing I would most want to explain to somebody who has not had it. Nobody who has this gets a film. There is no scene, no camera, no sequence. What you get is much stupider and much worse than that.

You get **temperature**. You get **texture**. You get the specific weight of an object in a hand that is no longer holding it.

* * *

The first one was in the shower.

Cold air on wet skin, which is an ordinary thing that happens in a shower, and which arrived that morning attached to something that was not the shower — a certainty, absolutely physical and entirely wordless, that I was outdoors, and that it was extremely early, and that being cold was correct.

I stood in there until the water went and then I stood in there after it went.

* * *

The second was gravel.

I was in a parking lot in Glendale and I stepped on some loose grit and my foot did a very small slide, three or four centimetres, the way a foot does, and my whole body reacted as though I had gone off a roof.

Wet gravel. Cold. Under one hand — not both, *one*, the right one, flat, fingers spread, taking weight.

I had to sit on a wall.

* * *

The third one is the one that frightened me, and it came in my own kitchen while I was cooking, and it was in my hands.

Weight. A specific mass in the right hand, hanging down, about the weight of a full bottle of water, distributed wrong — heavier at the bottom, with give in it, the way a bundle of loose things is heavy.

And an absolute conviction, arriving with the weight and inseparable from it, that this object was *mine*. That it had been given to me. That somebody had put it in my hand and told me it was mine and that I had believed him completely.

I put down what I was holding and looked at my hand and there was nothing in it and there had been nothing in it for eighteen years.

* * *

By the middle of July I had, in total:

Cold. Early. Outdoors. Wet gravel under the right palm. A weight in the right hand that was mine. A smell of something burning that was not wood and not food. A sound, once, that I could not identify and that made me put both hands flat on a table.

And **up**. Always up. Whatever I was doing in that memory, I was looking up at something.

* * *

That is what people mean when they say the body keeps the score, and it is a phrase I had heard perhaps forty times in this country and had always understood as a metaphor.

It is not a metaphor. It is a filing problem.

The score is kept in a place that does not do sentences. It does temperature and load and angle and smell, because those are the things the animal needs, and it will hand them back to you in a parking lot in Glendale eighteen years later with no context whatsoever and no explanation and no order, and it will not tell you

what they are for, because it does not know. It only knows they mattered.

32. THE YEARS — I held

I want to be very careful in this chapter, because it is where a different book would have its collapse, and I did not have one.

I did not fall apart in the summer of 2021.

I want to say that plainly and I want the reader to sit with how unsatisfying it is. There was no breakdown. I did not miss work. I did not drink. I did not call anybody at three in the morning. I did not go to a doctor and I did not, at any point, tell one single human being that anything was happening.

I held.

* * *

Here is what holding actually consists of, in case anybody thinks it is passive.

It is **work**. It is a set of learned techniques, applied deliberately, several times a day, by a competent adult who is good at things.

You get up at the same time. You do not lie in the bed after the alarm, because that is where it comes. You put something on immediately — talk, not music, because talk occupies the language part and music does not. You make the day structurally full, front to back, with tasks that require your hands and your judgement, because a task that only requires your hands leaves you free and free is the enemy. You do not sit in a parked car. You do not stand in the shower. You do not, under any circumstances, allow yourself to be tired and warm and horizontal and unoccupied at the same time.

And when it comes anyway, in the middle of something, you do the thing I do not know how to describe except physically:

You put your attention on an object in the room and you make it the only object. A door handle. The grain in a bench. You describe it to yourself in sentences. You keep describing it until the sentences

take over, because the thing in your chest does not have sentences and cannot follow you into them.

Then you carry on with what you were doing.

* * *

I had all of that. Fully assembled, tested, reliable, and I had built it myself with no help from anybody, and here is the thing:

I did not build it that summer.

I had had it for years. Decades, possibly. I did not invent a single one of those techniques in 2021 — I already had them, the way you already have a way of walking. I had been holding something for eighteen years with a set of tools so well worn that I had stopped experiencing them as tools and had begun experiencing them as my personality.

I like to get up early. I don't like sitting around. I'm not a lie-in person. I like to be busy. I'm not really an introspective guy.

Every one of those is true. Every one of those is a thing my friends would say about me, affectionately, correctly.

Every one of those is a hand on a door.

* * *

And it worked.

That is the part I need people to hear. It **worked**. Six weeks of the worst thing that had ever happened to my body and nobody in my life noticed, and my work did not suffer, and I was, by every external measure and most internal ones, fine.

I am not describing a failure. I am describing a success.

I was extremely good at this. I had been made extremely good at this by eleven years of behaving as though I was alone in a country where nobody could help me and nothing was coming, and every single quality that got me from a car wash on Sepulveda to a life I built with my own hands was, that summer, deployed at full strength, with total competence, **against myself**.

The strength is the lock. There is no other lock. There never was.

33. THE YEARS — the angle

The thing that broke it was not a memory. It was a measurement.

I want to be exact about this because it is the most useful thing I have to offer anybody who has one of these, and it is not what people expect.

It was arithmetic.

* * *

For eighteen years I had a thing I had always understood as the central event of my adolescence, and I had always understood it as a gift, and it had a very specific and unvarying shape:

I was above.

That is what it was. That is the whole phenomenon. Every tenth night, from the age of nine, I left my body and looked down at a yard from a point about four metres above the tarpaulin, and I could see the crowd and the bulbs and the tear in the corner that nobody fixed, and I saw everything from above.

And in the last year I ever did it, it moved. It went sideways over the wall, over the shop roof, over the main road, three streets, and it stopped over an alley. And I looked down into that alley and saw a man on the ground and men standing round him.

Down. Always down. Everything I have ever told anybody about this, including in a book, is a description of looking down.

* * *

And in the last week of July 2021 I was doing something completely unrelated — I was working out sightlines for a room, which is my actual job, which is literally a job about where a person's eyes are — and I had a plan on a screen and I was standing an imaginary human being at an imaginary door.

And a thing arrived in my chest with no warning at all and no words attached and I had to put both hands on the desk.

Because everything my body had given me that summer was **level**.

* * *

Cold air on the *face*. Not on the top of the head. On the face, straight on.

Gravel under the *right palm*, flat, taking weight — which means I was down on one hand, which means I was on the ground, which means I was in a body, which means I had one.

A weight *in the right hand*, hanging down at the end of an arm.

And **up**. Always up. Six weeks of fragments and every single one of them was looking up.

You do not look up from four metres above a tarpaulin. There is nothing up there. There is sky.

* * *

I sat down at my own desk in Frogtown at about four in the afternoon on a Tuesday and did the geometry with a pencil like a schoolboy.

If I am at eye level. If I am four metres away. If the ground slopes toward a drain and the man's head is at the low end and I am at the high end at the mouth of it. If there is a bulb in a wire cage above a green gate and it is above me and to my left, which is why I am looking up, which is why my face is cold, which is why there is a smell of something burning that is not wood.

Then everything fits. All of it. Every fragment, in one position, with nothing left over.

I was standing at the mouth of the alley.

* * *

I would like to describe what I felt and I cannot, because I did not feel anything for about ninety seconds. I have been told this is common. There is a gap.

What I did was: I closed the file, I saved it, I said goodnight to two people, I drove home on Riverside with the radio off, I parked, and I sat in the car outside my own building for four hours.

And at some point in that four hours the last piece went in, and it went in quietly, the way the worst ones do.

Because if I was standing at the mouth of that alley at four in the morning on Ashura [aa-shoo-RAA] when I was fourteen years old — then **somebody in that alley could see me.**

34. THE CALL — the basin

She rang on a Sunday in August, in the morning her time, and she said: are you free? and I said yes.

And she said: I'm going to finish it.

* * *

She said: he went.

Farangis told him not to. She was seven months pregnant and she was the king's own daughter and she knew that court better than anybody alive and she said: whatever the letter says, do not go.

And he went, because he had a system, and the system was that if you stand in front of people and you are innocent, it comes out all right.

She said: they arrested him on the road.

* * *

She said: Garsivaz had gone ahead of him. Of course he had. He had ridden ahead and told his brother that Siavash was coming with an army, which was three hundred men and a pregnant wife.

She said: and Afrasiyab came out and saw him and — and this is the detail I have never got over, Ali — for a moment it nearly did not happen. He saw the boy's face and something moved in him. Ferdowsi says it. He looked at him and hesitated.

She said: and then Garsivaz said something. One more small thing.
And that was the end of it.

* * *

She said: they took him out to open ground.

She said: and Farangis got out of wherever they had put her and came and threw herself in front of her father and pulled her own hair out. That is in the poem. She tore her hair and clawed her face and said, he came to you, he had nowhere else, my mother's God will not forgive you.

She said: and Afrasiyab had her taken away and locked up.

* * *

There was a pause on the line and I said nothing at all.

She said: now I want you to hear how they did it, because it is the whole poem.

She said: they did not kill him where he stood.

They dragged him some distance out. And they had brought a **basin**.

And they held him over it.

She said: and Ali — this is the thing — they did it that way **so that his blood would not touch the ground**.

I said: why?

And my mother, from a kitchen in Elahieh, with a bad right hand, said:

Because they knew what innocent blood does when it touches the ground. It cries out. It makes something grow. It brings the thing back.

She said: they were not being tidy, my love. They were being *careful*. They were frightened of what he would become if any of it

got out, and so they held a young man over a bowl and made sure the earth did not get a single drop.

* * *

She said: and one drop got out anyway.

She said: one. That is all that ever gets out.

And where it fell, a plant came up. It came up the same day, out of nothing, out of hard ground, and it had leaves like a hand, and it is still called what it is called: **par-e siavashan** [PAR-e see-yaa-vaa-SHAAN]. Siavash's feather.

She said: you know it. You have seen it a thousand times. It grows on the wet stone at the edge of every fountain in this country. It's the little fern.

She said: you can buy it in a pot on Vali Asr.

* * *

I did not say anything for so long that she said: Ali jan.

And I said: I'm here.

And she said: it's all right. It's a very old story.

And I said: Maman —

And she said: yes?

* * *

And I did not do it.

I had it in my mouth. I was thirty-three years old sitting on the floor of my own kitchen in Los Angeles with the phone on the tiles beside me and my mother was there, awake, willing, in the room where I learned to read, and I had it in my mouth.

And I said: nothing. I said, it's a good story.

And she said: it's not a good story. It's a true one.

She said: they're different.

35. THE YEARS — the gate

Here is what I know and here is how I know it, and I want the difference between those two things to be visible on the page, because I have spent two years trying to keep it visible in my own head.

* * *

What I know.

On the tenth day of Muharram, in the winter I was fourteen, I got up before four in the morning and left my uncle's flat in Nazi Abad [naa-ZEE aa-BAAD] and walked three streets and stood at the mouth of an alley a metre and a half wide with a bulb in a wire cage over a green gate, and I watched what was happening in that yard.

I do not have a memory of doing it. I have a body that will not stop describing it.

* * *

How I know.

Cold on the face and not the crown, which means level. Right palm on wet gravel, which means down on one hand, which means I had a body. A weight in the right hand which was mine, which was a chain, which Agha Sadegh had given me every year since I was nine and which I had carried through the streets that night with the rest of them. Looking up, which means the bulb. Burning, which is naphtha, which is what they used in that neighbourhood to get a brazier going before dawn in Esfand. And the geometry, which fits at one position and no other.

And: **you were at the corner.** Eleven words from a dying man in 1387 that I have carried for twelve years and understood as morphine.

And: my grandfather stood me at that corner when I was six and nobody ever told me, and I inherited a habit I have no memory of

having and walked to a gate I had never been to and knew which one it was.

* * *

That is the case. It is entirely circumstantial. There is no photograph, there is no witness who has spoken, and there is no living person who has told me a single word of it.

I want that on the record because a great deal follows from it and I am aware — I am extremely aware — that I am a man who is very good at building something out of pieces and making people believe it.

That is literally my job. I put fragments in a room in an order and a stranger walks out convinced.

* * *

But there is one more thing and it is not circumstantial, and it is the reason I stopped arguing with myself in August 2021.

For six years, every tenth night, I put myself four metres in the air.

Not once. **Every time.** For six consecutive years, in a state I did not control and had never chosen, the single unvarying feature was that I was above the yard, looking down.

There is only one thing on earth that a fourteen-year-old boy is doing when he removes himself from his own body every single time and hangs above it, and it is not receiving a gift.

He is getting out of a position.

I was not being shown anything. I was being taken somewhere else.

And the one place I was never, in six years, in any state, at any tempo, allowed to be —

was standing at eye level, four metres away, at the mouth of that alley, with a chain in my right hand.

36. THE YEARS — he saw me

This is the shortest chapter in this book and I have rewritten it eleven times.

* * *

If I was standing at the mouth of that alley, then Sohrab Ayeneh [soh-RAAB aa-yee-NEH] looked up and saw a fourteen-year-old boy in the gateway.

He knew me. He had covered a microphone once so that two hundred men would make a corridor for me and my tray. He knew whose grandson I was. He knew I had his part in the play the following year, or would have, or was about to.

And he was twenty-four, and he was in the middle of it, and he was being watched.

* * *

I have run every other version. I want that understood. I have spent two years running every other version, professionally, the way I would interrogate a room I was building.

That he did not see me. That he saw me and it changed nothing. That the cut was already made. That a scalp artery is a scalp artery and men have died of it who nobody was watching. That my uncle said *wait* and eleven minutes passed and none of that has anything to do with a boy in a gateway.

All of those are possible. Several of them are likely. I cannot disprove one of them.

* * *

And I know what I know, which is what happens to a person when they are being looked at.

I know it because I have had it my entire life. I have had a yard of four hundred men look at me and I have felt what it does. I have stood in front of a room and felt the moment it lands and gone one step further than I was going to go. I did it in a garage in Highland

Park on the fourth of June and lost my sentence when the boy's hands went still.

Being looked at makes people go further. That is all it does. That is its entire function.

And on the tenth day of Muharram, in a yard behind a green gate, before it was light, a man who could hear a room was in the middle of the only thing he ever did that nobody was allowed to watch — and a child he loved was standing in the gateway with his mouth open, looking up.

* * *

I do not know that it was because of me.

I know that I was there, and that I have spent eighteen years hanging four metres above a tarpaulin rather than be there, and that when the thing finally came back it came back as cold and up and a weight in my right hand.

And I know that of everything my body handed me over six weeks in the summer of 2021, the piece it would not give me — the only one, the piece I do not have and have never had and am now certain I will never get —

is his face.

PART FIVE — THE EVENING

37. THE CALL — the morning of

She rang at seven in the morning my time, which was half past six in the evening there, on Thursday the nineteenth of August 2021.

She had no reason. She had stopped bothering with reasons that year.

* * *

She said: are you working today?

I said I was.

She said: what is it? The one with the water, or the other one?

And I told her about it — 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 who fought about it in 1913 — and she listened to all of it, the whole way through, the way she has listened to me describe things since I was four.

And at the end she said: that's a good one. That's the sort you're good at. You'll want to make them stand still first.

Which is exactly what I had done, and which I had not told her, and I said: that's what I did.

And she said: well. I'm not stupid.

* * *

She said: your grandmother does not understand a single thing about your life. Either of them.

I said: no.

She said: they want you married and closer. They were horrible about the hair.

And then she said, and it was completely unweighted, the way she puts the enormous things down:

She said: I understand it. I want you to know I understand all of it.

She said: I know what you did. I know what it cost. You went to a country where you had nobody who was obliged to you, at

twenty-one, with two bad hands and you built the whole thing yourself and nobody helped you and I have never once had to worry about whether you would manage.

She said: most mothers do not get that. Most of us worry until we die.

She said: **I have not worried about whether you would manage since about 2013.**

* * *

I said: Maman.

And she said: what.

And I said: nothing. It's early.

She said: it's always early there. It's a stupid country.

* * *

Then she said: what are you doing tonight?

And I said — and this is completely true, and I had not planned it, and I had not thought about it once until the words were out of my mouth:

I said: I don't know. Nothing.

And she said: good. Do nothing. You never do nothing.

38. THE YEARS — an ordinary reason

Somebody at work said it at about four in the afternoon.

That is all. A woman called Nasrin, who is fifty and from here since she was six and who I have never once discussed anything with beyond work, was on the phone to her mother in the corridor and I heard about nine words of it and one of them was **shaam-e ghariban** [shaam-eh gha-ree-BAAN].

And I stood there with a coffee and thought: *is it already?*

* * *

I looked it up on my phone at my desk like a foreigner. That is what I want on the record. I checked the date of Ashura on a website, in English, the way you would check when Diwali is.

The nineteenth. Tonight.

* * *

I want to be accurate about my state of mind at four o'clock on that afternoon, because everything after this is going to look like a decision and it was not one.

I was not resolved. I had not been building toward it. I had spent six weeks working out where I had been standing when I was fourteen and had told nobody and had held, successfully, and had every intention of continuing to hold, and I had no plan of any kind that involved a hall or a night or two hundred strangers.

What happened was much smaller and much stupider.

I thought: *it's August.*

* * *

I had never once, in my entire life, been in a Muharram that was not in the cold.

The early ones were spring, the tail of winter, snow still on the mountains. The last ones, the ones that count, were Esfand. Minus four or five. Breath going up under the bulbs. My whole body knows the month as a temperature, and the temperature is cold.

And I was standing in an office in Los Angeles in a T-shirt and it was ninety-four degrees outside and the asphalt in the lot was soft.

The calendar had walked. Eleven days a year, for eighteen years, which is about two hundred days, which is most of a season and a bit, and it had carried the tenth of Muharram out of the snow and into high summer without asking anybody.

The tenth day is about thirst.

And in Tehran I had spent six years mourning it in a coat.

* * *

That is why I went. I want to be honest even though it is unimpressive.

Not to confront anything. Not to remember. Not to grieve.

I went because I wanted to know what it was like in the heat.

* * *

I drove out of Frogtown at about half past six with the sun still fully up and the freeway the colour of a coin, and I did not put anything on in the car.

39. THE YEARS — the man with the dish

It was a rented hall behind a business on a boulevard and the lot was full so I parked two streets down and walked.

Ninety-four degrees at seven in the evening. The asphalt gave slightly under my shoe at the edge where it meets the kerb, the way it does out here in August, and I registered that and did not think about why I registered it.

Black banners on the fence with the white writing. Same writing. A folding sign on the pavement in Persian and English. Minivans. Children running in the lot in good clothes, at speed, weaving between cars in the way children do at these things everywhere on earth.

There was an ice chest by the door with bottles of water in it and a boy of about nine standing next to it whose entire job was to make sure it stayed full.

I stood on the far side of the lot for I do not know how long.

* * *

There was a folding table by the door with a stack of foam containers on it and a man behind it.

He was about sixty and he was wearing a good coat.

That is the first thing I noticed, because it was ninety-four degrees and he was in a coat, and he was in a coat because it was the tenth

and you wear a coat. I have known men like that my whole life and I had not seen one for eleven years.

Grey at the temples. Glasses pushed up on his head and forgotten about. Not a religious-looking man at all — a man who had come from somewhere else, an accountant, a dentist, a man with an office.

And his hands were wrong for the coat. Thick across the back. One thumbnail gone black. The fingers of a man who did something with them for thirty years before he did whatever he does now.

* * *

He was not looking at anybody.

He was doing the thing men do at that table, which is lift the lid, ladle, close it, hand it over, take the next, and he did not stop while people spoke to him.

I knew that rhythm. I had seen it from underneath, at the height of a tea tray, in another country, from a man with forearms like a door.

* * *

I did not decide to walk over. My legs did it while I was still on the other side of the lot thinking about the coat.

He put a container in my hands without looking up.

It was warm through the bottom and I had to change hands, and I looked at it and it was gheimh. Split peas, dried lime, meat cooked down to nothing. A spoon of rice with saffron dragged across the top the way somebody's mother taught somebody.

In a foam container with the lid steaming on the inside, in a parking lot, on a boulevard, at ninety-four degrees.

* * *

And he said the thing. Not a greeting. The sentence that goes with the object and no other sentence, flat, already looking past me at the next person:

Ghabool bashe. God accept it.

* * *

And I said the answer.

I did not decide to. I had not said it in eleven years and my mouth had it, whole, in the right register, in the accent of a neighbourhood eleven thousand kilometres away that I have not lived in since I was fifteen.

And the man's eyes came back up.

* * *

Because it is not the words. Anybody can learn the words. It was the *south* of it, in a parking lot on a boulevard, out of a man in his thirties in a linen shirt who had come from somewhere with money.

He looked at me for slightly too long.

Then he said: **bokhor, pesaram.**

Eat, my son.

And he put the ladle back in the pot and took the next container off the stack.

* * *

The whole thing was thirty seconds. I never learned his name. I have never seen him again and I have looked.

* * *

I stood at the edge of that lot with a warm foam container in both hands and could not have told you what was happening to me.

Here is what was happening to me.

I had been in this country eleven years and I had built every single thing in my life with my own two ruined hands and I had been extremely proud of that, and it had made me strong, and the strength was the lock.

And a man in a coat in a parking lot handed me a hot meal I had not earned, had not applied for, had not achieved, and could not refuse.

That is what that food *is*. That is the entire mechanism and I had explained it beautifully at about thirty dinner tables in this country. You may not sell it. You may not keep the good part. You may not ask who is taking it. And the man taking it is not accepting charity — **he is helping somebody pay a debt they owe.**

He was doing me the favour.

* * *

I ate about half of it standing up, next to a fence, in the heat, like a man at a bus stop.

Then I put it in a bin and wiped my hands on my jeans and went in.

40. THE YEARS — the room

I got about a metre and a half inside the door and my feet stopped, and it took me a second to understand why, and the reason was that **I already knew where everything was.**

* * *

Not the room. I had never been in that room. It was a rented hall in Los Angeles with a drop ceiling and a fire exit sign and a laminate floor that somebody had put rugs over.

But the *arrangement*.

The shoes were to the left inside the door, in a heap, on a piece of plastic sheeting. Of course they were. Where else would they be.

The tea was at the back on the right, on two trestle tables, with the glasses upside down on a cloth and a boy of about eleven in charge of it who did not want to be.

The old men were on chairs along the wall, on the left, near the front — not at the back where the chairs would be more comfortable, at the front, on the hard ones, because that is where they have sat since they were fifty.

The curtain was up the middle, and behind it the women's side, and the sound coming from behind it was slightly different in a way I could not have described and could identify instantly.

And the front — the strip of carpet in front of the microphone, two metres deep, empty — was empty because it is always empty, because that is where the men go when it starts.

* * *

I have been in perhaps four thousand rooms since I was fifteen. I have designed sixty of them professionally. My entire trade is knowing where a person's body will go in a space they have never been in before.

And I stood in the door of a rented hall in a country I had lived in for eleven years and my feet knew the floor plan of a yard in Nazi Abad.

* * *

I went to the back and sat down against the wall with my knees up, which is where I have always sat when I have not been at the front, and it was only about ten minutes later that I understood that I had not sat like that since 2004.

* * *

There were maybe two hundred and thirty people. Half of them under forty.

There were boys in basketball shorts. There were two girls behind the curtain-edge on their phones, unbothered, being told by somebody to put them away. There was a man in front of me in a Dodgers cap that he took off when the cleric started and put back on afterwards without thinking about it.

Somebody's grandmother had brought a folding stool from home.

Half the conversation in that room was in English.

* * *

And I want to put this down because I had not expected it and it undid something in me before anything had even started.

It was **cheerful**.

Before it begins, that room is a party. People had not seen each other since last year. Men were embracing each other and asking after businesses. Somebody was being congratulated about a daughter. Two men were arguing about parking with enormous energy. A woman was going along the row with a plate of dates and would not take no.

I had forgotten that. Eighteen years and I had somehow kept only the last four hours of every night and thrown away the first two, and the first two are *this*, and the first two are the reason anybody comes.

I sat against a wall in a room full of strangers being pleased to see each other and I thought, with no warning at all and no particular emotion:

I have not been in a room like this since I was fifteen years old.

And then a man I had never seen went up to the microphone and tapped it twice with his finger and the whole room began to sit down.

41. THE YEARS — the telling

The cleric spoke for about thirty-five minutes and it was boring and it was supposed to be.

He talked about debt, and about being decent to people who work for you, and he made two jokes that landed and one that did not. He had an accent from Isfahan [es-fa-HAAN] and about a fifth of what he said was in English for the room, which he did without any apparent feeling about it.

It is flat ground. That is what that part is. You stand on it before the ground tilts.

I sat against the wall with my knees up and let it go past me and thought about nothing at all, and about halfway through I noticed

that I was comfortable, and it was the first time I had been comfortable in six weeks.

* * *

Then the man who was doing the rowzeh came up. Fifties, ordinary suit, a folder.

And he did what they do, which is start somewhere absurdly small.

* * *

He did not start with the battle. He did not start with the river or the army or the tenth day.

He started with a woman making bread.

He said: think about the last normal morning in that camp. The sixth of the month. Nobody has been cut off from the water yet. Somebody is making bread. There are fifty-odd children in those tents and somebody has to feed them and it is an ordinary Tuesday and somebody is kneading dough with sand in it because you cannot keep sand out of anything in that country.

And he stayed there. He stayed in that tent, on that morning, with a woman and some dough, for about six minutes.

* * *

I want to describe what he was doing, because I do it for a living and I have never once seen it done better by anybody.

He was making you stand still.

He would not let you have the tenth day. He would not let you have the thing you came for. He held you in a tent on an ordinary morning until you had a woman's hands in your head, and only then — only when the room had somebody to lose — did he let the seventh of the month happen.

That is the whole craft. Give them somebody alive for four minutes. Then the second wall.

I built a room in a county historical society in 2016 on exactly that principle and won a small award for it and told a woman I admired that I did not know where I had learned it.

* * *

And he was good. He was really good. He was not as good as the man I grew up with, and I knew that within ninety seconds, and I want to note that I made that judgement instantly and professionally and without any feeling whatsoever, the way you would notice a joint that was not quite square.

* * *

And then he got to the seventh, and the water, and the three days, and the children going quiet — and I felt something happen in my chest and it was not what I had spent six weeks bracing for.

It was **fondness**.

I sat against the wall in a rented hall in Los Angeles and thought about a boy of eleven carrying a tray of tea at chin height through a standing crowd, in the dark, with his forearms shaking, being the only person in the building allowed to move.

And I smiled. Actually smiled, in a room where two hundred people were beginning to weep.

I had not thought about the tray in eighteen years.

42. THE YEARS — my mouth had it

The nowheh started and I knew the words.

* * *

I want to be precise about the sequence, because it took about four seconds and it is the whole of this chapter.

The lead voice sang the first line. And before he had finished it, before I had recognised the thing or placed it or done anything at all with my mind, **my mouth had already begun the response**.

Not out loud. My lips moved. Some air came out.

Eighteen years. I had not thought of that line, sought it out, heard it, or been near it in eighteen years. If you had put a pen in my hand that afternoon and offered me money to write down one line of one nowheh I would have handed you a blank sheet.

And a stranger sang four words and something below language answered him.

* * *

I sat there with my hand over my mouth like a man who has hiccuped in a lecture.

* * *

Then the slow section. The latmiyeh [lat-mee-YEH].

Open hand on the chest, once about every second and a half. Two hundred people. And the sound of it is not what you think, it is not a clap and it is not a drum, it is wet, and it arrives from every direction at once, and you feel it in your own sternum before you have decided anything.

And I did not join in. I want that on the record. I sat against a wall with my knees up and my hands on the floor and I did not lift a hand.

And my chest went anyway. Half a beat behind, the way a foot taps. I could feel it doing it. I put a hand flat on my own sternum like a man checking for a heartbeat and it was going with them and I had not authorised it.

* * *

And this is where it came, and it did not come as horror.

It came as pleasure.

* * *

I am fifteen years old and I am at the front, three metres from the shop door, and it is minus four and there is fine dry snow going

sideways under the bulbs and my back is opened up and my throat is gone.

And it is the best feeling I have ever had in my life.

* * *

I need to be extremely clear here because this is the sentence I have been avoiding for forty chapters.

Nothing in America has come near it.

Not the degree. Not the certificate in the drawer. Not the first room with my name on it, or the woman who taught me telling me I had built it like a piece of music, or the morning I got citizenship, or standing in the ocean up to my knees every October, or my mother on a telephone at four in the morning saying she had seen me in a stadium.

All of that was good. Some of it was better than good. I built it out of nothing and I earned every gram of it and I would not give one hour of it back.

And none of it has ever come within a hundred miles of what I felt at fifteen years old, in the cold, at the front, on the tenth night.

That is the thing nobody will let you say. Everybody wants the yard to have been the wound. The yard was the wound. The yard was also the only time in my life I have been entirely inside my own experience with four hundred people breathing at my speed, and the fact that a man was running it at a hundred and twenty-nine beats a minute for money does not make one single second of what I felt untrue.

Both. It was both. It has always been both and it will be both until I die.

* * *

And I sat against that wall in Los Angeles at ninety-four degrees and I began to cry, quietly, with my hand over my mouth, and nobody looked at me, **because that is what the room is for.**

43. THE YEARS — the shoor

The lead voice lifted and the beat doubled and the shoor [SHOOR] came in.

* * *

Two hundred people stood up. The Dodgers cap came off. The boys in basketball shorts went forward into the empty two metres of carpet without being told, the way you go, because you have always gone.

And the sound went up in that hall the way it goes up, and the second voice came in on the delay, saying the name, over and over, into the machine, so that it came back doubled and stacked and became the clock.

And I estimated the tempo.

I did not decide to. I have done it in cars and gyms and supermarkets for nine years and called it a preference, and I did it in a rented hall on the nineteenth of August 2021 and got a number, and the number was in the window.

It was not his number. I want to say that. It was somewhere in the region and it was not exact and the man on the microphone was thirty-something and from Encino and had never heard of a butcher in Nazi Abad.

That is just how fast this is done.

Nobody designed the window for me. It is where the human body goes. He did not invent it — he found it, in me, the way you find a note in a room by clapping.

* * *

And then nothing happened.

* * *

I want to be exact, because I have been inexact about myself for most of this book and I would like to stop before the end.

Nothing was withheld. Nothing came up and was pushed back down. There was no door, and there was nothing behind the door, and there were no eleven seconds of holding on to anything.

Two hundred people went up into it, and I stood four metres away at the back of that room with my hands out of my pockets — because I had taken them out, because some part of me still knew the shape of what was supposed to happen next — and my chest did not go, and my face stayed dry.

The beat was correct and it did nothing.

* * *

I checked.

That is the part I am least proud of and the part I am most sure about. I stood in a rented hall at ninety-four degrees and ran the check, twice, the way you press a bruise to find out whether it is still there. Is this loss. Am I being deprived of something in this room.

No.

What I felt was the ordinary, decent, faintly warm interest of a man at the back of somebody else's wedding.

* * *

Here is what I think it is. I have had four years.

A room does that to you by making you available. It needs you to arrive already porous — already willing to be one of a number, already prepared to hand the top of your own head to a beat you did not set and a man you did not choose. That is not a weakness and I will not have it called one. It is the whole technology. It is thirteen hundred years old, it works, and I have watched it work on four hundred men at once in a yard where I was one of them, and it was the best thing in my life.

It requires a person who can be a number.

And somewhere in eleven years — in a room on Kester with a mattress, a library card and no furniture, reading nine or ten books

a month for no reason and telling nobody; in a car park at one in the morning with a man from my drawing class who would not let me get away with a sentence; in a joint on a fire escape in my second year that made me laugh for an hour and then think, badly and thrillingly and entirely on my own, for a week; in eleven years of getting up in a country where nobody was coming, and deciding before lunch, by myself, what I was going to believe — somewhere in all of that, without one deliberate act and without ever once noticing it happen, I stopped being able to be a number.

I did not grow out of the story. I have never grown out of the story and I do not expect to.

I grew out of being a number in a room.

* * *

The memory came anyway. Late, and flat, and from no particular angle.

The gate. The bulb in the wire cage. Wet gravel under the right palm. A weight in the right hand that was mine. A man in the middle of a small yard, in the middle of the only thing he ever did that nobody was allowed to watch.

It arrived the way a fact arrives — the way you remember a telephone number.

I did not have to put my attention on an object. There was a fire exit sign above the door on the far wall, green and white, with a running man on it and an arrow, and I looked at it for a while because it was there and because it was well made, and not because I needed it to be.

That is the whole difference between thirty-three and fifteen, and it took eleven years and two hands.

* * *

I stood at the back of that hall for another forty minutes and I was completely fine, and this time there was nothing for me to be fine about.

44. THE YEARS — the chairs

It ended the way it ends, which is that it does not end so much as thin out.

The shoor stops. Somebody says something into the microphone about next year and about a man who is in hospital and would people please remember him. The lights, which have been half off, come all the way on, and everybody looks worse, and everybody starts talking at once.

Then the chairs.

* * *

I do not know why I stayed.

I have thought about that more than anything else in this chapter. The lot was emptying. I had a car two streets down. Nothing had happened to me and I was fine, and every instinct I have built over eighteen years was telling me to go home and have a glass of water and get up at the same time tomorrow.

I stayed. I stood at the back with my hands in my pockets while two hundred people put their shoes on.

* * *

The man stacking the chairs was about my age.

He was in a black shirt with the sleeves pushed up and he was doing it efficiently and alone, six at a time, walking them to a trolley by the fire exit. Nobody had asked him to. He was one of those.

I do not know his name. I did not ask. He did not offer.

* * *

He came past me with a stack and stopped and looked at me for a second and said:

You all right, boss?

Completely ordinary. American. Slightly Valley. A man clearing a room, being polite to the last person in it.

* * *

And I tried to tell him.

* * *

I want to describe what I did, exactly, because it is the last thing that happens in this book and because I have spent four years unable to decide what it was.

I said: sorry. First one in eleven years.

And he put the chairs down.

* * *

I got as far as a yard behind a butcher's shop in south Tehran. I got as far as being nine and not speaking. I got as far as a man with forearms like a door who put a boy at the front of a procession because he did not know what else to do with a child who would not talk —

— and I heard my own voice start doing the thing.

The tea tray first. The cold in early, so he can feel it. The chain held back until the third beat, because you do not give them the high note while they are leaning.

And I stopped in the middle of a sentence.

* * *

Not because it hurt. It did not hurt.

Because it was not for anything.

There was no room to hold. There was no table to move. There was nobody leaning. There was a tired man with a trolley who had asked a polite question at eleven o'clock at night, and the machinery I have been running since I was fifteen years old had nothing to do, and would not start, and I stood there with my mouth open like a man whose car will not turn over.

I said: it was a long time ago. Sorry. It's late.

It took about eleven seconds and it was terrible.

* * *

He said: no worries, boss.

He said: get home safe.

And he picked up the chairs.

* * *

I drove back on the 101 and went past the exit, and did not look at it, and did not not look at it, and got in at ten past midnight.

I stood in my own kitchen, in a country I chose, at thirty-three years old, with two hands that do not close and everything in the room bought with them, and I made tea badly, the American way, in a mug, and took it out to the step under the lemon tree.

And I picked up the book I was two hundred pages into — a book about glass, and how long it takes to cool, and what happens inside it while it does — and read until nearly two, the way I have done four nights a week for six years, for no reason, for nobody, because I want to.

* * *

I woke at eleven minutes past four.

For about nine seconds I did not know which country I was in, or how old I was, or whether the thing on the other side of the wall was a tarpaulin with a tear in the corner that nobody fixed in six years, or a window with a lemon tree behind it.

And in those nine seconds all of it was equally true.

The chain and the cold and the steam coming up off four hundred men. My uncle on the floor of a front room in the dark with a third of a set of lungs. An alley, a slope, a drain, and the ground going out from a man's head in the shape of a hand. A hall in the Valley with the lights all the way on. A boy at a gate at four in the morning making a face I have seen twice in my life and made once.

And a woman on a telephone eleven thousand kilometres away, telling me in instalments, over eleven years, about a young man who was innocent, and was proved innocent, and was killed anyway in a foreign country by people who were kind to him.

I could not have told you which of those I had lived and which I had been dreaming, and — this is the part I want to put down — it did not frighten me.

* * *

Then the room came back, the way rooms do.

Ceiling. Fan. The corner of a drawing table. A phone on the floor with the screen up.

Nine seconds, and I was a man in a flat with light in it, in a city I chose.

I lay there for a while.

* * *

My brother lives forty minutes from here now. That happened last year, and I have not written about it, and I am going to have to.

My mother is most of the way back from a stroke and calls me on Fridays, and has recently started telling me things about my father that I did not know and am not ready for.

My father is in a house in Mirdamad with his mother's spice tins still on the shelf and a chair he sleeps in.

And there is a row at Behesht-e Zahra [be-HESHT-e zah-RAA] that I have never stood in and cannot get to.

* * *

I got up and put the kettle on, because it was eleven minutes past four and there was no sense in either of us pretending.

GLOSSARY

advieh [ad-vee-YEH] — Persian, *spices*. A household blend, varying by family, sent between them.

Afrasiyab [af-raa-see-YAAB] — king of Turan, Iran's ancient enemy; the man who took Siavash in.

Ashura [aa-shoo-RAA] — Arabic. from *'ashara*, ten. The tenth day of Muharram.

Behesht-e Zahra [be-HESHT-e zah-RAA] — Persian, *the paradise of Zahra*. Tehran's great cemetery, south of the city, named for the Prophet's daughter.

Elahieh [e-laa-hee-YEH] — an affluent district in the north of Tehran.

Esfand [es-FAND] — the last month of the Iranian solar year; late winter.

Farangis [fa-raan-GEES] — daughter of Afrasiyab; wife of Siavash. One of the few women in the *Shahnameh* permitted to be right and not listened to.

Ferdowsi [fer-dow-SEE] — the poet who compiled the *Shahnameh*, *The Book of Kings*, around the year 1000.

Garsivaz [gar-see-VAAZ] — brother of Afrasiyab. He never lied; he chose what to mention.

ghabool bashe [gha-BOOL baa-SHEH] — *may it be accepted*. What is said when votive food is handed over.

gharib [gha-REEB] — Arabic, *stranger*. Not someone unknown, but someone far from their own people and therefore unprotected — a person with nobody obliged to come. Plural **Ghariban** [gha-ree-BAAN].

ghimeh [ghey-MEH] — a stew of split peas, meat and dried lime, cooked in bulk and given away during Muharram.

ghorboonet beram [ghor-BOO-net be-RAM] — literally *may I be sacrificed for you*. An ordinary endearment.

heyat [hey-AT] — Arabic, *a body, a form*. A neighbourhood mourning association.

Isfahan [es-fa-HAAN] — a city in central Iran, and an accent.

Karaj [ka-RAJ] — a city west of Tehran.

Kavus [kaa-VOOS] — king of Iran; father of Siavash. He knew his wife was lying and let his son ride into the fire anyway.

Khordad [khor-DAAD] — the third month of the Iranian year; late spring.

latmiyeh [lat-mee-YEH] — Arabic. from *latm*, to strike. The slow chest-beating section of a mourning night.

Mordad [mor-DAAD] — the fifth month; high summer.

Muharram [mo-har-RAM] — Arabic, *forbidden*. The first month of the Islamic year, in which Hossein was killed at Karbala. Because the lunar year runs short, it moves backwards through the seasons and takes about thirty-three years to return.

Nazi Abad [naa-ZEE aa-BAAD] — a working-class district in the south of Tehran.

nowheh [now-HEH] — Arabic. from *nawh*, wailing; the cry of a dove. The sung lament, performed in call and response.

par-e siavashan [PAR-e see-yaa-vaa-SHAAN] — *Siavash's feather*. The maidenhair fern, said to have grown where one drop of his blood escaped the basin. It grows on wet stone at the edge of fountains throughout Iran.

Rostam [ros-TAM] — the great hero of the *Shahnameh*. He raised Siavash and taught him everything, and then handed him back.

rowzeh [row-ZEH] — Persian, *garden*. The prose telling of the Karbala story, from a book written in 1502 whose title became the word for the telling itself.

shaam-e ghariban [shaam-eh gha-ree-BAAN] — *the evening of the strangers*. The night after Ashura, when the tents were burned

and the survivors were left on open ground with nobody obliged to come for them.

Shahnameh [shaah-naa-MEH] — *The Book of Kings*. Ferdowsi's epic, some fifty thousand lines, completed around the year 1000.

shoor [SHOOR] — Persian. *fervour*; also *salty*. The fast final section of a mourning night.

Siavash [see-yaa-VASH] — the innocent prince. Accused of a thing he did not do, proved by fire, exiled, killed in a foreign country over a basin.

Siavashgerd [see-yaa-vash-GERD] — *the place Siavash made*. The city he built in exile.

sofreh [sof-REH] — Persian. *a cloth spread on the floor for eating*

Sudabeh [soo-daa-BEH] — wife of Kavus. She wanted Siavash, was refused, and accused him. She is not a monster in the poem — she is a woman in a palace with one kind of power.

Sug-e Siavash [SOOG-e see-yaa-VASH] — *the Mourning of Siavash*. An annual rite of lamentation practised in Iran and Central Asia for centuries before Islam, and recorded by historians who complained about the noise.

Turan [too-RAAN] — the country beyond the river; Iran's enemy in the *Shahnameh*.

Zabolestan [zaa-bo-les-TAAN] — the eastern land of Rostam's family.

Los Angeles, May 2010. Ali Shabani arrives with one suitcase, nine hundred dollars and two hands that do not fully close. Nobody meets him at the airport. He has a job in eight days.

For eleven years he builds all of it himself — the college, the degree, the studio, the citizenship — and nobody helps him and nothing is given to him, and the strength that takes is the most attractive thing about him. It is also the lock.

There are somewhere between eleven and twenty mourning halls in greater Los Angeles. He knows where nine of them are. He has never been in one, and he has never once decided not to go.

Eleven thousand kilometres away, across eleven years and eleven telephone calls, his mother tells him the oldest story in their language: a young man accused of something he did not do, proved innocent in front of an entire city, and destroyed anyway by people who were kind to him.

"I grew out of being a number in a room."



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