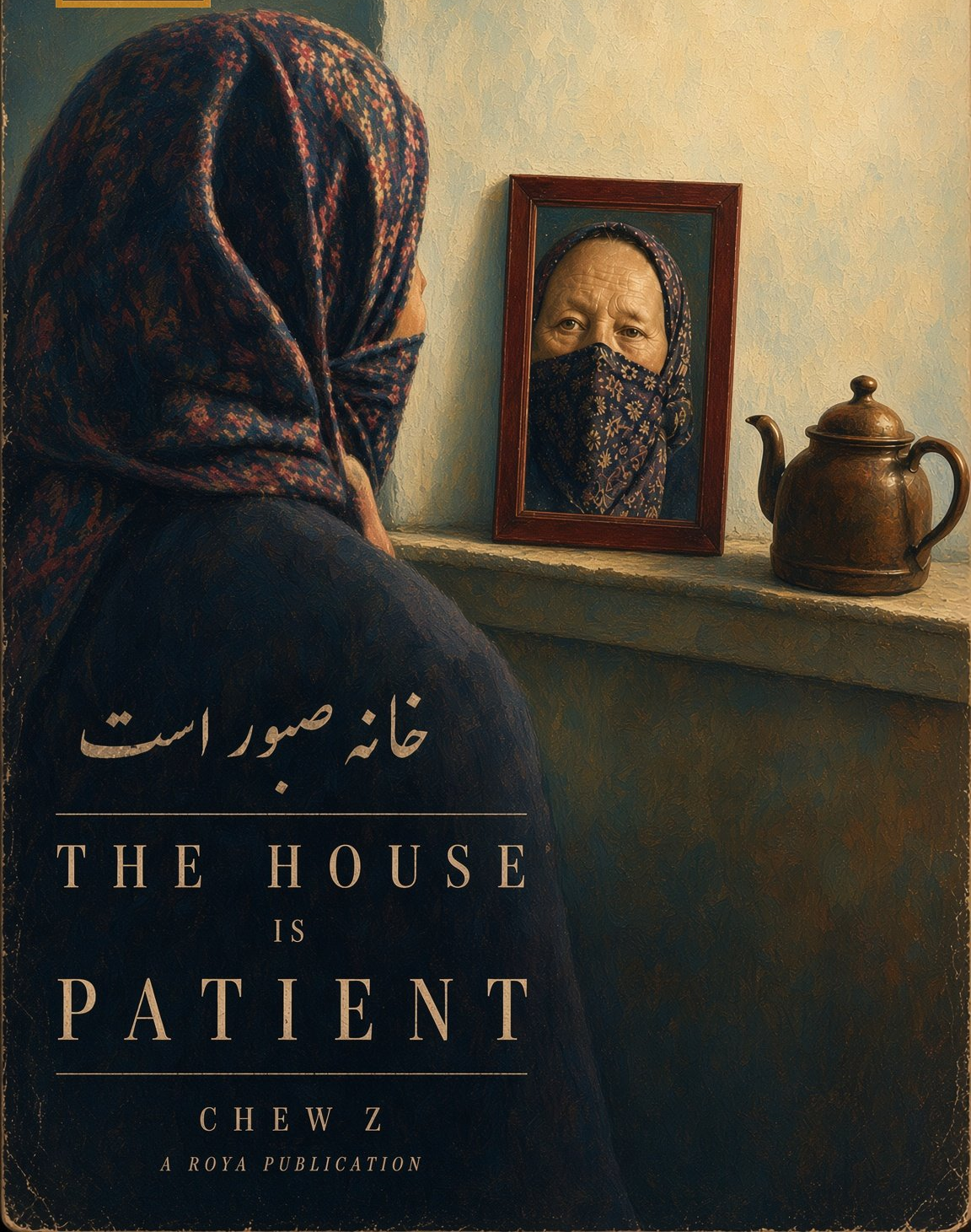


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No. 63



خانه صبور است

THE HOUSE
IS
PATIENT

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 63

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

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The Unheard House

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Printed in the Reach



For Forough Farrokhzad

1934–1967

who went to a place nobody would go,
stayed twelve days,
and brought a child out with her.

What is true here, she found.

What is cruel here, I made.

Do not confuse the two.

REEL SEVEN

eight cards in eleven minutes and four seconds



I ask for nothing.

My life has been given to me and I have not asked why.

There is a garden.

I will see it when I am done.

My son is well.

God is patient with us.

I am not afraid.

Let it be as it is.

Reel seven is the most famous single take in the film: a woman speaking directly into the lens, without a cut, for eleven minutes and four seconds. Over her, in every print, in nine languages, are eight subtitle cards. Eight, in eleven minutes — long stretches of her speaking with no card at all. The sparseness has been written about at length and admired as an act of respect. It has been anthologised as a prayer. There is a choral setting of it by a Finnish composer.

SYNOPSIS

Rotterdam, 1996. Dariush is a film restorer who sits alone in a cold room and looks at single frames for eight hours at a stretch. In March he burns his forearm on a lamp housing and does not know it for four hours, and finds a patch of skin the size of a playing card that has stopped reporting to him.

He does not go to a doctor. He goes upstairs, in the dark, to eleven cans of film that came to him through two lawyers when he was nineteen.

The film is famous. It was shot over twelve days in 1962, in a walled colony eleven kilometres past the end of a road, by a woman who believed she was bearing witness and who came out with a child. It has been screening at festivals for thirty-four years. Audiences weep at it.

Running it frame by frame, Dariush begins to find the things it recorded and nobody was ever meant to see. A cabinet in a clinic that was never empty. A classroom in which something else is happening along the back row, in focus, in the background, for four minutes. A teacher whose eyeline never once falls on the back wall of her own room. And eleven minutes of a woman speaking directly into the lens in a dialect nobody in the room could follow, subtitled in nine languages as a prayer.

They did not send him out to be saved.

They sent him out to be found, and they were prepared to wait thirty-four years for it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I first saw *The House Is Black* as a teenager in Iran, on a copy of a copy, in a room where we were not supposed to be watching it. It is twenty-two minutes long. I lasted most of it, and what I felt was not admiration. I was frightened, and underneath the fright, which is harder to write down, I was disgusted. I remember wanting it to stop and I remember being ashamed of wanting that even while I wanted it.

It took me a long time to understand that this reaction was the film working exactly as she intended, and that I had failed a test she had set on purpose.

Forough Farrokhzad went to a leprosy colony near Tabriz in 1962 and stayed twelve days, at a time when nobody touched those people and nobody looked at them and the official position of the civilised world was that they should be somewhere else. She filmed them eating, praying, playing ball, marrying, having their beards trimmed and their wounds dressed. She filmed a classroom. She refused, absolutely and throughout, to let their faces be the whole of what they were. And she came out with a child, whom she raised.

She was thirty-two when she died, five years later, on a road outside Tehran.

What she did in those twenty-two minutes is the thing this imprint exists to do, and I want to say so plainly rather than leave it as an influence in a list. She took a group of people whose appearance made them unbearable to look at, and therefore unbearable to hear, and she made a piece of work that forced the looking and then, having forced it, made the looking beside the point. That is the whole trick and almost nobody manages it. Most attempts either flinch or wallow. She did neither. She held the camera exactly still and let a woman look at herself in a mirror for eleven seconds longer than anyone wants, and by the end of it you are no longer looking at a disease.

Every book I have published under this number and the sixty-two

before it has been an attempt at the same manoeuvre with different material. The unheard are not usually silent. They are usually unpleasant to attend to, for reasons of smell or grammar or damage or shame, and the world's indifference to them is not cruelty so much as flinching — the ordinary, automatic, physical pulling-away that a body does when something arrives it does not want. That flinch is the subject of this entire series. It happens to be, also, the medical fact at the bottom of this book, which is not a coincidence I planned and which I noticed only after the structure was built.

Leprosy is not a rotting disease. That is folklore and it is wrong. It kills the nerve, and everything that follows — the ruined hands, the blindness, the shortened fingers — happens because a body stopped sending word and its owner could not be warned. It is a disease of not feeling. I have spent a year now with the thought that the people we cannot bear to look at have, in that specific sense, less of a problem than we do.

I want to be exact about what is invented here, because the real people are owed that.

The colony in these pages is not Baba Baghi. The filmmaker is not Forough. The child is not the boy she adopted, who is alive, who has a name and a life and a profession of his own, and who has never been anything other than a man and certainly not a device in somebody's novella. The conspiracy at the centre of this book did not happen. Nobody rationed anybody's medicine. There was no register.

What is true is the disease, the arithmetic of the graveyard, the fact that the cure has existed cheaply since the 1940s, and the fact that these places went on existing anyway, for decades, because it was easier for everybody outside the wall not to look.

She looked. As a frightened teenager in a room where we should not have been, I did not, and it has taken me most of my life to grow into the mind that made that film.

This one is hers.

Chew Z

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PART ONE — THE STAGING

1 • The Cold Room

*I came here for the faces.
Let that be written somewhere honest,
in the ledger where they keep my name and my permit.
I have a hunger with beautiful manners.
I have twelve days
and a house that has been waiting
longer than I have been alive.*

The building I work in was a customs shed until 1974 and it has never entirely stopped being one. You can still see where the freight doors were bricked up, a slightly different red, like a scar that healed under supervision. On the ground floor a man restores municipal footage — parades, dredging, the mayor cutting things — and on the second floor there is me, and a Steenbeck flatbed the colour of a hospital, and four hundred cans of other people's memory in a room I keep at fifteen degrees.

Everybody in this trade develops a private way of describing what we do. The Belgians say they are *washing* film. My predecessor said he was a dentist. I have never had a phrase for it, which I used to think was a failure of imagination and now understand differently.

What I do is sit still and look at one frame for a long time.

That is the entire job. A frame is a photograph that lasts one twenty-fourth of a second and was never meant to be looked at, and if you look at it long enough it stops being part of a film and becomes a room you can walk around in. You see the boom shadow. You see the extra in the third row who is not acting. You see that the light has moved four inches between two shots that are supposed to be continuous, which means somebody broke for lunch, which means somebody lied.

I can do this for eight hours. The others cannot. Willem gets up every eleven minutes; I have counted, not out of cruelty but because counting is also a thing I can do for eight hours. He walks to the window, he touches the radiator, he comes back. He has a body that keeps sending him messages and he answers all of them,

every time, the way a man answers a telephone in an empty house because he cannot bear the noise.

I used to be quietly, stupidly proud of this. I thought it was character.

In March I burned my forearm on the lamp housing of the Steenbeck and did not know until Els asked me at dinner what I had done to my arm. There was a mark on it the length of a matchstick, a good clean burn, already blistered, and I looked at it the way you look at a coat someone has left on your chair. It belonged to somebody. I had been wearing it for perhaps four hours.

Els is a sound editor. She is Dutch to a degree that people from Utrecht find excessive. She said, *you did not feel that*, not as a question, and I said something about being absorbed in work, and she let it go, because we have been married sixteen years and she knows which of my doors are painted on.

The mark healed. What did not heal was the patch around it, which is the size of a playing card and lies on the outside of the left forearm, and which is not numb in the way a foot is numb. A foot going numb announces itself. This does not announce anything. If I close my eyes and Els draws on that patch with the tip of a pen, I know she is there, I can feel the pressure, I simply cannot feel *what*. Hot, cold, sharp, blunt — the arm has opinions on all four and declines to share them. It has gone discreet.

That was three months ago. I have told no one. I have looked it up in one library, in a language I read badly, on purpose.

And I have been running the reels every night since.

There are eleven cans. They came to me in 1975, through a lawyer in Tehran and then a lawyer in Paris and then a woman at a festival who handed them over in the bar of a hotel and said, *these are yours, apparently*, in a tone that suggested she had expected me to be more grateful. I was nineteen. I put them in a cupboard for six years.

Nine of the cans are the finished film. Two are trims — the cuttings, the discards, the material that lost. Everybody who has ever heard

about the trims has assumed they are worthless, and until March I was one of them.

I want to be precise about what I was doing in March, because I have gone back over it many times and I still cannot find the moment where I decided.

I did not decide. I went numb, and I went to the reels.

It was not a plan. It was closer to what a dog does when it is unwell, which is to go and lie in the one place it associates with safety and stay there without knowing why. My arm stopped reporting and I climbed the stairs to the cold room and threaded the first can, and the flatbed made its noise like a lift descending, and I sat down in front of forty minutes of black-and-white that I have known since I was nineteen and could describe frame by frame with my eyes shut.

And I began, without instruction, to look for something.

I have thought about that more than I have thought about the arm. Because a man who finds a numb patch on his body goes to a doctor. That is what the interruption is *for*. That is the whole design — you are hurt, the body screams, you attend to it, you live. It is the oldest arrangement in the world and it is very nearly the definition of being alive.

I did not go to a doctor. I went upstairs, in the dark, alone, and sat perfectly still in front of the only object I own from before, and started looking for the reason.

At the time I thought this was grief, or vanity, or the ordinary morbid curiosity of a man turning forty in a wet city.

I know now it was obedience.

2 · Eleven Kilometres

*The road ends and then continues badly
the way a sentence continues after the truth in it.
There is no sign for where I am going.
The men who drew the map were told the place exists
and were not told what it is called,*

*and so they left a thumbprint of white
and went home to their wives.*

The road is good for eleven kilometres.

Parvaneh Kamrani notices the precise point at which it stops being good, because she is sitting in the back of a hired Jeep with a Bolex in her lap and nothing to do but notice things. The metallised surface simply ends, mid-slope, without warning or barrier, the way a man stops talking when he decides he has said enough. After that it is graded dirt, then track, then two pale lines in the scrub where vehicles have been before but not lately.

‘Someone paid for eleven kilometres,’ she says.

Jalil is in front with the driver and does not turn round. He is twenty-six and has been hired for eleven days and is already regretting eight of them. ‘Someone paid for a photograph of eleven kilometres,’ he says.

She writes that down. She writes everything down; it is the only discipline she has ever kept.

They come over the rise at four in the afternoon and the House is below them in a shallow bowl of ground, and she puts her hand on the driver’s shoulder to stop the car without saying anything, and gets out, and stands in the road.

It is smaller than she expected and much more beautiful, and both of these facts make her feel obscurely cheated.

A wall of mud brick the colour of weak tea, half a mile around, low enough to see over from up here. A line of poplars along the northern edge, planted decades ago by somebody who thought about shade, throwing long moving stripes across the roofs. Whitewash inside — everything whitewashed, walls, doorframes, the low kerbs of the paths, so white in the afternoon that it hurts to look at directly. Smoke from the kitchen. Two women crossing a yard with a basket between them. A dog.

It looks like a village. That is what she will say later, to everyone, for the rest of her life: *it looks like a village, it looks like any village*

in the country, that is the first cruelty, that they gave it the shape of a place where people simply live.

'Get this,' she says.

Jalil gets it. Four hundred feet, from up on the rise, the whole bowl in one static frame with the poplars moving. It will be the second shot in the finished film and it will be on the poster.

'They know we are coming?' he says.

'They have known for six weeks.'

'They agreed?'

She looks at him. Jalil has the face of a man who wants to be told the arrangement is clean, and she has not been able to give anyone that face for a long time now.

'A committee agreed,' she says. 'In an office. With a stamp.'

The gate is wood, and old, and standing open. There is a painted board above it with the Ministry's designation — STATION NINE — and underneath, in smaller letters, the word that the Ministry uses in its correspondence and that she has been careful not to say aloud since Tehran.

Nobody is waiting for them.

This throws her more than a delegation would have. She had prepared herself for hostility and prepared herself for gratitude, and had rehearsed a small speech for each, and what she gets is a hot empty yard, a dog that does not get up, and the sound of somebody sweeping out of sight.

They stand in it for four minutes with the camera and the cases.

Then a woman comes out of the school with an exercise book under her arm and walks across the yard towards them without hurrying, and this is Ozra, though Parvaneh will not learn her name for another hour and will not spell it correctly in her notes for three days.

She is perhaps fifty. She has no eyebrows. Parvaneh registers this and registers her own registering of it, the small internal lurch, the flinch she has promised herself she will not perform, and she is so

busy managing her own face that she almost misses the fact that Ozra has stopped four feet away and is looking at her with what can only be described as patience.

'You are the guest,' Ozra says.

Mehmān [meh-MAAN]. The ordinary word. Guest, visitor, the one who is received.

'I am Parvaneh Kamrani. This is Jalil. We are —'

'You are the guest,' Ozra says again, agreeably, as though correcting a child's arithmetic without embarrassing it, and turns and starts walking, and they follow her, and Parvaneh writes in her notebook that evening: *they are a hospitable people, formal, they use the polite forms.*

Thirty-four years later a man in a cold room in Rotterdam will run that reel and hear the word and think nothing of it either, for eleven more months.

3 · What You Remember

Forty minutes.

Ten thousand people have wept in the dark at it

and gone out into the street afterwards

and eaten something,

and told a friend they must see it,

and slept well.

This is not their fault.

I built it to do that.

You have probably seen the film.

I say that without vanity, since I had nothing to do with making it and everything to do with being in it. It runs forty minutes. It has been in the Sight and Sound lists twice. It plays at retrospectives in cities where nobody can find the country on a map, and it is taught in schools in three languages, and there is a print in a vault in Belgium that is rated to survive most things a building can do.

If you have seen it, here is what you remember.

You remember the opening, which is a woman at a mirror. It is a small mirror with flowers painted round the frame, propped on a shelf at the wrong height, and she is looking into it and adjusting her headscarf. She has no nose. There is an opening in the middle of her face where the bridge came down, and one of her eyes has gone white, and she does not blink, and the shot is held eleven seconds longer than you want it to be held.

That is the first thing that happens, and it is the reason people talk about the film in the tone they use.

You remember the boy who says the prayer — the ordinary child's prayer of thanks, *for hands to work with, for eyes to see with* — recited in a flat little voice to somebody off camera, while the hands he is thanking God for lie curled in his lap like two things asleep.

You remember the classroom, obviously. Everybody remembers the classroom. The teacher asking them to name beautiful things, and the answers coming in the way children answer, competitively, all of them at once — the moon, the sun, flowers, playtime — and then the same teacher asking them to name ugly things, and the pause, and a small boy at the front saying: hand. Foot. Head.

You remember the man on crutches at the end coming straight at the lens until he blacks out the frame.

You remember the gate closing.

What you probably do not remember, because it lasts nine seconds, is a child of five or six being carried across the corner of a shot on somebody's shoulder, out of focus, in the direction of the bathhouse.

That's me.

I have watched this film since I was nineteen. It would be reasonable to assume I watched it in the way an orphan reads a birth certificate, which is what I told the two women I was involved with in my twenties, both of whom were very moved and neither of whom asked a follow-up question. It made a good story. It made me interesting in the specific way that a young man in Europe with a bad history is interesting, and I traded on it, and if there is a small

crime at the bottom of my life it is that one and it is not the one I am writing about.

She gave me a name out of a book, which is what you do when a child arrives without one. Dariush. I have had it thirty-four years and it has never once felt like a thing I was called rather than a thing I answered to, and I did not understand why until this year.

The truth is duller and worse.

I watched it looking for my mother's face.

Not out of longing. I have never had a single memory of the place — nothing, not a smell, not a doorway, and I have tested this repeatedly and unkindly. I was five. Nothing came out with me. So there was no longing available, and what I had instead was arithmetic: there are two hundred and ten people in that colony and roughly ninety of them appear in the film and one of them made me, and I have forty minutes of black-and-white in which to work out which.

I did that for eleven years. Every woman's face, frame by frame, in the cold room, on the flatbed, with the sound off.

I never found her.

I want you to hold on to that, because it is the piece I cannot forgive, and I will be coming back to it.

She is in the film. She is in it for eleven minutes, uninterrupted, alone in the frame, talking directly into the lens.

I looked at her, at four frames a second, more times than I can count, and I did not know, and there was no reason on earth I should have known.

But she knew. She is looking at the camera because she is looking at me. She is speaking to a room she will never see, in a city she cannot imagine, thirty-four years in front of her, and she is telling me the one thing that would have saved all of us.

And it is subtitled, in every print, in every language, as a prayer.

4 • No Corners

*There is not one sharp corner in this place.
I have gone round with my hand out like a blind woman
touching the doorframes, the tables, the lip of the water,
and every edge has been taken off by somebody
patiently, over years, with a rasp.
I came to film the ruined.
They have built the gentlest room on earth
and I cannot make my hand stop shaking.*

By the end of the second day she has three pages and none of it is what she came for.

Whitewash. Everything, twice a year, inside and out, walls and kerbs and doorframes and the stones round the water. She had assumed poverty — the same cheap lime over everything because there is nothing else. It is not that. She asks a man refilling a bucket why and he says, without looking up: so that a mark shows.

She does not understand this for another two days and when she does understand it she has to leave the yard.

Corners. There are none. Not on any doorframe, not on the tables in the kitchen, not on the low walls, not on the stone channel that brings the stream down through the middle of the compound, whose lips have been worked round by hand, unhurriedly, across years, so that the whole watercourse has the soft shoulders of something in a bathhouse. Nowhere in this village is there a right angle at the height of a hip. You could walk the entire place blindfold and not take a cut.

She writes: *they have made it safe for people who cannot be warned.*

Then she crosses it out, because it is too neat, and she has a horror of the too neat, and she writes it again underneath anyway.

Sound. This is the one that gets under her, and it takes her until the third day to find the words, and it is Jalil who finds them first, standing in the yard at dusk with the camera down.

'Nobody drops anything,' he says.

He is right. In an ordinary village there is a constant low percussion running under everything — a cup set down badly, a coin, a knife on a board, the small clatter of objects being fumbled and caught by hands that know they can catch. Here that sound does not exist. Objects are placed. Two hands, always, and set down flat, and released deliberately, and the release is a separate action from the placing. She watches an old man put a glass on a table with the care of a man defusing it.

A hand that cannot feel cannot catch.

So there is no percussion, and the absence of it gives the whole House the manner of a church, and the effect on a visitor is not peace. The effect is a low continuous alarm that she cannot locate the source of. She sleeps badly for eleven nights and blames the mattress.

The graveyard. They pass it on the way to the shrine and she asks, idly, how many people live in the House.

‘Two hundred and ten,’ Ozra says.

Parvaneh looks at the graveyard, which is the size of a football pitch and full, and does the arithmetic while she is walking, and it comes out and lands in her, and she keeps walking and says nothing, and Ozra says nothing either, and lets her carry it.

She will think about that silence a great deal in the years afterwards. She will decide it was tact.

The money. On the second morning she is shown the tokens, and this is the first thing in the House that delights her, in the shameful greedy way that a good detail delights a person who makes films.

They mint their own coin. Aluminium, light as a bottle cap, stamped with a crescent on one side and a number on the other. It has existed for thirty years, since the disease was believed to travel out on cash, and the belief was wrong, and the coin was struck anyway and never withdrawn. They buy bread with it. They pay each other with it. The boys gamble with it against the school wall.

Eleven kilometres up that road it is worth precisely nothing.

‘And this?’ she says, turning one over. ‘Two thousand and six?’

'That is not the value,' says Ozra.

'What is it?'

Ozra takes the coin back from her, gently, with two hands, the way everything is taken and given in that place, and puts it in her pocket.

'A number,' she says.

5 • The Second Take

Somebody has moved the sun.

Between the second shot and the third

the shadow of the poplar has walked four inches west

and a woman has changed her mind about being filmed

in a light that arrived an hour later.

Grief does not keep to a schedule.

Only work does.

I found the first one on the ninth of April, at about two in the morning, and I have the date because I wrote it on the can label before I understood why I would want it.

It is not a discovery in any dramatic sense. It is the dullest thing in the world and any competent restorer would have caught it, and the only reason nobody has is that nobody has ever had a reason to run the trims and the finished film against each other on the same bench, frame by frame, at four frames a second, in the middle of the night, in March, with an arm that has stopped reporting.

Here is what is in the film.

Reel one, second minute. Parvaneh and Jalil arrive in the yard and begin to set up and a man comes out of a doorway and refuses to be filmed. He is perhaps sixty. He puts his hand up — a curled hand, the fingers drawn in — and says no, twice, and turns his back and goes in, and the camera keeps running for a beat too long on the empty doorway.

It is a famous nine seconds. It is quoted in essays. It is the moment the film declares its ethics: *we are not entitled to these people, and here is the proof, we left it in.*

Then, forty seconds later, a woman comes out of the same doorway and stands and lets them film her, and does not speak, and the film has begun.

In the trims, the same man refuses in the same doorway, in the same clothes, with the same hand.

And the shadow of the poplar across the door is four inches west.

I sat with that for a long time. There is a very ordinary explanation and I went and got it and held it up: film is expensive, light changes, a cameraman with eleven days and a limited stock might well ask a man who has already refused to refuse again, later, in better light, and no honest person would call that a lie.

Except that the man's second refusal is better.

Not different. *Better*. The hand comes up a fraction earlier and stays up a fraction longer. The turn is cleaner. The head is angled so that the light gets the side of the face where the damage is, which it does not in the first take. In the first take he mumbles the second *no*. In the second take he does not.

He got a note. Somebody gave that man a note between takes, and it was a good note, and he took it well.

I checked the woman who follows him. Two takes. The second one better.

I checked everything in the first four minutes.

By the middle of April I had found eleven separate setups in the trims that exist twice, and in every single case the version in the finished film is the second one, and in every single case the second one is stronger. Not stronger in the sense of better photographed. Stronger in the sense of better *performed*.

Somewhere around the fifteenth I stopped and made myself say the whole thing out loud in the cold room, because there is a discipline in this work about not letting a theory live in your head where it can grow in the dark.

The most celebrated act of restraint in the history of the documentary — the refusal that the filmmaker left in to show she knew she was an intruder — was rehearsed.

Not by her.

I got Jalil's number from the back of a Dutch festival catalogue in a library in Amsterdam. He had given a talk in 1988 and the organiser had printed his address, which is the kind of carelessness that no longer happens and which I have benefited from twice in my life.

He answered on the fourth ring. Seventy-eight, and the voice was thirty years younger than the man.

I said who I was. There was a silence of about four seconds, which is a very long silence on a telephone, and then he said, in Persian, in a completely different register:

'You are the boy.'

'Yes.'

'What took you.'

Not a question. He did not ask it as a question. Thirty-four years, and the first thing that came out of him was mild professional impatience, the tone of a man who has been sitting in a waiting room since 1962 and is now being seen.

'I have some questions about the arrival footage,' I said.

'Yes,' said Jalil. 'Of course you do. Come to Cologne. Not on the telephone, and not because of the police. Because I am old and I will need to see your face when I tell you.'

6 • The Looking

*At the bell they come out into the last of the light
and take each other's feet into their laps.*

I have never been touched like that.

*Not by my mother, not by either husband,
not by the man I ruined myself for
in the summer I do not write about.*

*They are looking for stones and small openings.
It is the tenderest thing I have ever filmed
and I am so lonely I could put my face in the dirt.*

The bell goes at sundown and it is not a religious bell. It is a school bell on an iron bracket by the kitchen door, and a boy rings it by pulling a cord, and it is the only sharp sound in the whole of the House.

Two hundred doors open.

Parvaneh is standing in the middle of the main path with a light meter in her hand when it happens and she has no warning of it, and she turns on the spot, once, all the way round, and Jalil — who has been half asleep against a wall — is on his feet with the Bolex before she has finished turning, which is the only reason the sequence exists.

They come out and sit down in pairs.

On the low walls, on the steps, on the kerbs, in the last twenty minutes of usable light: two by two, all across the compound, unhurried, in a distribution so even that it can only be habit and looks from a distance like choreography. Husbands and wives. Two old men. A woman and a girl. Two boys, sniggering, being told to sit properly by somebody's mother.

And then they take off their shoes and begin to go over each other.

It is done in a fixed order and Parvaneh will not work out the order until Day Six. Feet first, always. One person takes the other's foot into their lap and goes over it with their eyes four inches away — sole, heel, the sides, between each toe, the skin behind the ankle — and then turns the shoe over and shakes it out and runs a finger round the whole inside of it. Then the other foot. Then the hands, palm and back and the web between each finger. Then the forearms. Then the face, which is done with a small mirror if the pair are equally sighted and with fingertips if they are not.

Then somebody counts blinks. She thinks at first that this is a game.

There is talking throughout. Ordinary talking, gossip, complaint, a boy being asked about his arithmetic. Nobody is solemn. It has exactly the tone of a family shelling beans on a step, and it goes on for perhaps twenty-five minutes, and then the light goes and they get up and go in.

'What is it called?' she asks.

'*Negāh*,' says Ozra. [ne-GAAH]

The Looking. The plainest word in the language for it. To look at, to have a look, to keep an eye on.

'Every evening?'

'Every evening.'

'For how long?'

Ozra considers this. 'How long has anyone been alive here.'

Parvaneh films it on the second evening and again on the fourth and the seventh and the ninth, and it will be four and a half minutes in the finished film, and it is the material that everybody uses when they talk about the beauty of that House, and it is the reason the word *tenderness* attaches itself to a film about a leper colony and never comes off.

She has understood one thing correctly. She has understood that these people cannot be warned by their own bodies and so must be warned by each other, that the Looking is an entire civilisation's answer to the problem of a silent nerve, and that a stone in a shoe left unfound will open a hole in a foot across a week and never once announce itself. All of that is true and she gets all of it, and she gets it in the first forty-eight hours, and it is the reason the film is great.

What she does not have is the boy.

He is in the sequence. He is in it on nine of the twelve evenings, and he is always in the fourth pair from the poplars, which is where the last of the light is and therefore where a cameraman with limited stock will point. He is five. He is passed from lap to lap across the twenty-five minutes — his feet done by one woman, his hands by another, his face by a third — which is how it is done with the small children, everybody says so, ask anyone, the little ones go round.

Four adults handle him on the second evening.

Three of them are among the worst cases in the House.

He is the only child in the compound who goes round.

PART TWO — THE RATION

7 • Cologne

*The old men who worked on the great cruel projects
are all living in small flats now
with a balcony and a plant they water on Sundays.
None of them are hiding.
That is the thing nobody tells you.
You knock, and they put the kettle on,
and they have been ready since before you were born.*

Cologne in May, and the flat was on the fourth floor of a post-war block behind the station, the kind of building that was put up quickly by people who had recently learned what happens to buildings.

Jalil opened the door in a cardigan.

That is the detail I keep going back to. I had spent the entire train journey constructing him — I had him as a man with something to protect, a man who would need working on, and I had prepared four different approaches and discarded three of them somewhere around Duisburg. And what opened the door was a small tidy widower in a brown cardigan with reading glasses pushed up on his head, who looked at my face for slightly too long and then stood aside and said, ‘You have her hands.’

‘Whose?’

‘Parvaneh’s,’ he said. ‘You are holding the strap of your bag exactly the way she held the strap of her bag,’ and he went into the kitchen to deal with the kettle, and I stood in the hallway of a stranger’s flat in Germany and had to put my hand on the wall.

I want to record that he was kind. There is a version of this account in which the cameraman is a coward and an accomplice and I go at him for four hours and break him open. That version would be easier to read. What actually happened is that a decent, careful old man made tea and answered every question I asked as accurately as he could, and the accuracy was the injury, and by the end of the afternoon I wanted him to lie to me and he would not.

We did an hour of nothing first. His wife, dead in ’91. His son in Hamburg. My work, which interested him professionally — he

wanted to know about the Steenbeck, he wanted to know what we were doing about vinegar syndrome, he asked two questions about my splicing that no one has asked me in eleven years.

Then he said: 'You have found the doubles.'

Not a guess. He had put four decades between himself and that fortnight and he had never once stopped knowing precisely what was in the trims.

'Eleven setups,' I said.

'There are nineteen.'

I had my notebook out and I did not write it down, which tells you something about the state I was in.

'She knew?'

'Parvaneh?' He took his glasses off his head and cleaned them on the cardigan, which I came to understand was what he did instead of pausing. 'She ordered half of them. That is the part you will not want. She was not deceived about the retakes. She was a filmmaker with eleven days and forty rolls of stock and a man who mumbled his line, and she said, *again, please, and this time do not swallow the second no*, and she said it in front of me, and I turned over, and it is completely ordinary. Every documentary you have ever loved has that in it.'

'And the other half?'

Jalil put his glasses back on.

'The other half we did not order,' he said. 'The other half were offered.'

He said it happened first on the second morning. A woman had done a scene in the kitchen doorway, one take, perfectly good, and Parvaneh had thanked her and moved on. And an hour later the woman came and found Jalil where he was changing a magazine and said, in Azeri, that she had done it wrong and would do it again now, and did it again, and it was better.

'And you filmed it.'

'I filmed it. I was twenty-six and I had stock and a woman was standing in good light asking me to. What would you have done?' He shrugged, and it was not a defensive shrug. 'By the fourth day it happened perhaps twice a day. We started to enjoy it. We said to each other: they have understood cinema. We were extremely pleased with ourselves.'

'Who was giving the notes?'

He was quiet for a while.

'There was a woman called Ozra who taught the children,' he said. 'She was never once in front of the camera. Not one frame. I have looked. You will look too and you will not find her either.' He turned his cup round on the saucer. 'She used to stand behind me. Not in the way that people stand behind a camera to see what you are seeing. Behind my shoulder, at about here' — he touched the back of his neck — 'and she never spoke while we turned over. Not once in twelve days. And afterwards she would say something to somebody in Azeri, three or four words, and walk off.'

'You didn't have the Azeri.'

'I had perhaps a third of it. I am from Isfahan, boy. I had a third of it on a good day and none of it when they were quick.'

'And Parvaneh?'

'None. Not a word. She had the Persian and she was very proud of her ear and she had none of it at all.'

He got up then and went to the balcony door and stood looking at somebody's washing, and I let him, and when he spoke again the register had changed.

'We were told what was said,' Jalil said. 'That is the thing. We did not go untranslated. Somebody stood next to us for twelve days and told us what was being said.'

'Who?'

'Ozra,' he said. 'She had beautiful Persian. She translated everything.'

8 • The Woman Who Moves

The water comes down out of the hills and through the middle of the village

and every stone along its lip has been made kind by hand.

A boy runs past me with his arms out

and I flinch for him the whole length of the yard.

Nobody else does.

*They are watching him with the calm of people at a harbour
who know exactly how deep the water is.*

Day Three, and the House lets her in a little.

This is not a decision anybody announces. It is simply that on the third morning there are more doors open than there were, and a woman she has not spoken to says good morning to her by name, and when she sets the camera up by the water channel three boys come and stand in shot on purpose and have to be shooed, giggling.

She films the stream for most of the morning. It is the closest thing to a holiday she has had in two years.

The channel runs the length of the compound and it is the reason anyone chose this bowl of ground in the first place. It comes down off the hills cold and clean, and it has been given a stone bed, and the stone has been worked. She goes along the whole run of it with her hand out, touching, the way you would run a hand along a rail. Every lip rounded. Every corner taken off. Where the channel passes the bathhouse somebody has set two flat stones as a step and the edges of both have been rasped down to a curve.

‘How long does that take?’ she asks. ‘To do all of it.’

‘Which of us?’ says the man she has asked, who is a carpenter and who has three fingers on his left hand and holds a rasp with a leather cuff strapped round the palm.

‘Anyone.’

‘Forty years,’ he says. ‘On and off.’

She writes it down and underlines it and, later, in Tehran, in an editing room, at four in the morning, she will read that line in her

own handwriting and start crying so hard that the assistant will go out and stand in the corridor.

The boys play against the school wall with the tokens. Pitch and toss, and the game is old and universal and would be identical in any yard in the world, and she films four minutes of it and cuts it to eleven seconds. What she does not catch — because she is at the wrong angle and because she is watching the coins — is that one of the boys is holding his hand out flat to be looked at by another boy between throws, without either of them breaking off the argument they are having.

There is a woman in the yard that morning who does not come near her.

Parvaneh notices her because she is the only adult in the compound who has actively arranged her day around not being in shot. Everyone else has settled somewhere on the scale between shy and delighted. This one moves. When the camera goes to the north side she is on the south side. When they set up by the kitchen she goes to the water.

‘Who is that?’

‘That is Sanam,’ Ozra says.

‘She doesn’t want to be filmed.’

‘No.’

‘I’d like to talk to her.’

‘You may talk to anyone,’ says Ozra. ‘They are not mine.’

Parvaneh goes over at midday. Sanam is washing something in the channel and does not look up. She is perhaps thirty, which in that place makes her young, and her hands are far gone — both of them, the fingers drawn in tight to the palms — and she is managing the washing with her wrists and forearms in a way that is so practised it takes Parvaneh a moment to see that the hands are not being used at all.

‘Peace be upon you,’ Parvaneh says, in Persian.

Sanam looks up.

What happens next is nine or ten seconds long and Parvaneh writes three different accounts of it in three different years and never gets it to sit still. The woman looks at her. Not with hostility. Not with the shyness she has had from a dozen others. She looks at Parvaneh the way you look at a road you have been told to expect, and then she says one sentence in Azeri, quite fast, and goes back to the washing.

Parvaneh does not have Azeri.

She goes and finds Ozra by the school and repeats the sentence phonetically, badly, and Ozra listens with her head slightly tilted.

'She says she is not well today,' Ozra says.

'That's all?'

'That is all.'

And Parvaneh writes in her notebook: *S. — unwell, hostile? — try again later*, and does try again, twice, on Day Six and Day Nine, and gets her on Day Nine, and it is eleven minutes long, and it is the only interview in the film that Ozra does not translate.

9 • Good News

*The doctor is a kind man in a kind room
and he has good news for me,
and he says it twice
the way you say a thing to a child at a window
who has stopped listening
because outside, on the grass,
something is being buried.*

The consultant was thirty-five at most and he had the manner they teach them now, which is to sit at the corner of the desk rather than behind it, and he was so pleased.

That is not sarcasm. He was genuinely, professionally pleased, and I have thought about him often since with something close to affection, because he was the last person to be in a room with me while my life still had the ordinary shape.

He said the name of it. Then he said, immediately, before I could do anything with my face: 'This is completely curable.'

Then he said it again, in Dutch, slightly slower, and then he said it a third time in English, and I understood that he had been taught to do this because of what the word does to people.

Here is what he told me over about forty minutes, and I am setting it down plainly because it took me three months to stop rearranging it into something more dramatic.

It is a bacterium. It is very old and very slow and it has almost no interest in most of us — nineteen people out of twenty are simply immune, born that way, and will never catch it no matter what they do. It is not carried in a touch. It needs years of close living, the same air, the same bedding, the same small rooms, over and over, and even then it usually fails.

It does not rot anything. That is folklore and it is a thousand years old and it is wrong. Nothing dissolves. Nothing drops off in the night. What it does is go into the nerves — the long wires that run from the skin to the brain — and kill the wire. Not the hand. The wire.

So the hand stays. The hand works. The hand simply stops sending word.

'And everything else,' the consultant said, 'follows from that.'

He drew it for me on a pad, which I did not need but did not stop. The burn you do not pull away from. The stone in the shoe you walk on for a week. The fingers that shorten across years — not eaten, he was very clear about that, but worn back, injury after unnoticed injury, the bone quietly giving up ground each time. The eye that stops closing because the wire to the lid has gone, so a person stops blinking and does not know it, and the eye dries and clouds from the middle outward across months, and there is no pain at any point in that process, not one moment of it, and then they are blind.

'People go blind,' I said, 'from not blinking.'

'Yes.'

'That's the whole mechanism.'

‘That is the whole mechanism,’ he said. ‘Which is why it is such good news that we found yours early. You have one patch. Everything after this is prevention. You will take three drugs for a year and you will be fine and you will keep your hands.’

He asked whether I knew where I had contracted it.

I said I had been born in a colony and taken out at five.

And his whole face changed — not to pity, to something better and much worse, which was a kind of historical embarrassment. He said, carefully, that the treatment I would start on Monday had existed since the 1940s. Cheap. By mouth. Reliable. That the reason places like the one I was born in still existed into the sixties was almost never medicine. It was money, and administration, and the fact that nobody wants to look.

‘It was available,’ I said.

‘It was available.’

‘In the forties.’

‘Yes.’

I thanked him, and shook his hand, and went down in the lift, and stood outside on the Schiedamsedijk in the rain for about twenty minutes.

Because I was thinking about a locked cabinet in a clinic in a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of the road, which is in the film, which is on screen for nineteen seconds, in reel four, and which I have looked at perhaps three hundred times.

And I was thinking that I had never once asked myself what was in it.

I did not tell Els that night. I have gone over this and I cannot make it come out as anything other than what it is. I had a curable disease, a good prognosis, and a wife who is better at difficulty than I am, and I went home and ate a meal and did not say the word.

I started the drugs on the Monday and hid the boxes in a camera case.

I have since had a great deal of time to consider why, and the honest answer is not shame and it is not fear of losing her.

I did not want to be a patient.

10 • Bread

*The bread is put into the oven by a woman
whose hands closed years ago
like two flowers deciding against it,
and she is faster than my mother was.
I have filmed her for six minutes.
When I look at what I have,
I find I have filmed only the hands
and cannot tell you one thing about her face.*

The kitchen is the warmest room in the House and the only one with a right angle in it, which is the oven mouth, and there is a wooden guard fixed across the lower half of that.

Day Four. She spends nearly all of it in there.

Three women and a boy work the ovens from before dawn: two hundred and ten people, plus the school, plus whatever goes to the clinic, and the flour comes up from the town on a Tuesday. The senior of the three is called Golnaz, and Parvaneh films her for six minutes without moving the camera, and it is two minutes forty in the final cut, and it is the passage that people describe as unbearable.

Golnaz's hands are closed. Both of them. The fingers have drawn in over about fifteen years until they lie against the palm, and the thumbs still work, and that is what she has: two thumbs and two padded fists and a pair of forearms she uses like tools. She takes the dough and turns it against the board with the heel of the hand. She lifts and slaps and folds. She is fast — Parvaneh times her against her own mother's kitchen in her head and Golnaz is faster.

She does not look at what she is doing. She looks out of the window while she works, and talks, and laughs at something the boy says.

Then she stops, mid-sentence, and lifts her right forearm and turns it over and inspects the underside of it near the wrist, close, for about four seconds. Then she goes back to the dough.

Parvaneh does not ask about this until the evening, and when she does, Ozra says: 'She smelled it.'

'Smelled what?'

'She goes past the oven mouth many hundreds of times a day,' Ozra says. 'She will not feel it. So she uses what she has. She smells her own arm cooking before she can see it. That is a skill. It took her four years and two bad ones to learn it and she is proud of it, and if you ask her she will tell you, and you should ask her, because she thinks you have only come to film what is missing.'

Parvaneh asks her. It is on the reel. Golnaz laughs and holds up the fist and turns it over and says something and everybody in the kitchen laughs, and it goes into the film untranslated, with no subtitle, because Ozra tells Parvaneh it is a joke about her husband.

Here is what else is in that day and is not in the film.

The boy is in the kitchen for a long stretch of the morning. He is five, and he is under everyone's feet, and Golnaz gives him a piece of dough to work like every kitchen in the world gives a child a piece of dough to work. He is there when the bread comes out. He eats in the kitchen with the women rather than at the school, and Parvaneh, who has been in the House four days and has begun to relax, thinks this is charming.

He eats there every day. At the same time. Between the two firings, when all three women and the boy are in the same small hot room with the doors shut against the flies.

Ozra has never once been in the kitchen at that hour in twelve days.

She is in the school across the yard with her exercise book, and at eleven she looks up and out of the window, and if you slow reel three down to four frames a second you can see her do it, in the background of a shot of a dog, and the boy comes out of the kitchen forty seconds later.

11 • Two Hundred and Sixty-Four

*A stamp, a date, a signature, a quantity.
A stamp, a date, a signature, a quantity.
Two hundred and sixty-four times,
and not one month missing,
and every hand that wrote them
went home afterwards to a good dinner
and slept beside somebody warm.*

The Ministry of Health archive is in a basement in Tehran and I have never been in it. What I have is eleven weeks of correspondence, two hundred Deutschmarks to a researcher named Firouzeh who did the work properly and refused a bonus, and forty-one photocopies that arrived in a padded envelope in the second week of June.

They are supply records for Station Nine.

I had asked for something else. I had asked for the film permit, which is a different story and comes later. Firouzeh sent the permit and then sent a note saying that while she was in the box she had photographed the pharmacy schedules as well, because the box was thin and she was already there, and did I want them.

Two hundred and sixty-four monthly consignments. January 1940 to December 1961.

Not one gap.

I sat with those photocopies on the kitchen table for a long time, on a Sunday, with the children out, and I checked them against a table of doses that I had copied out of a library book in April and had not, until that morning, had any use for.

The colony had the cure from the beginning. The very beginning, the first years it existed anywhere in the world, delivered by cart and later by truck, monthly, uninterrupted, through a war and a coup and three ministers.

And it came in at roughly a fifth of what it should have been.

Not a tenth. Not a trace. A fifth is the important number, and it took me two more weeks and a second library to understand why, and when I understood it I had to go and stand in the garden.

A fifth is not neglect. Neglect looks like gaps. A fifth is not theft either; theft looks like a good month and then nothing. A fifth, delivered every single month for twenty-two years without one interruption, is a dose.

At that level the disease does not advance quickly. It also does not clear. People do not die of it in six years; they live with it for thirty, and the nerves go slowly, over decades, in the manner of something being negotiated rather than something being lost.

It preserves.

Someone worked that out. Somebody sat down with a table exactly like the one I copied in April and calculated the quantity at which two hundred and ten people would neither die nor recover, and then requisitioned that quantity every month for twenty-two years, and signed for it, and filed the counterfoil.

The signature on the receiving side is the same in nearly all of them. A physician's registration number and a name I could not read for three days and then could: Meshkat.

The signature on the *ordering* side, on the requisition, is not a physician at all. It is a colony officer's endorsement, which was procedurally required, and which in a place with no administration to speak of was given to whoever could write.

It is the same hand for twenty-two years. Small, upright, extremely regular, the handwriting of somebody who teaches children to write.

There is a version of me that got up from that table and went to the police, or to a newspaper, or on to an aeroplane.

What I actually did was go upstairs to the cold room and thread reel four and find the nineteen seconds of the clinic and run them back and forth, back and forth, until I could see the cabinet behind the doctor's shoulder clearly enough to count the shelves.

Three shelves. Full.

And a woman in the queue in the foreground, waiting her turn, with her hand out.

12 · The Cabinet

*They stand in a line in the sun to be given something
and I have filmed the line
and I will call it patience,
and everyone who sees it will call it patience,
and there is a word in that language for what it actually is
and nobody will say it to me
for thirty-four years.*

Dr Meshkat comes on the last Thursday of the month and he comes in a green Land Rover with a driver, and Day Four is a Thursday.

Parvaneh films the whole visit. It is the most conventional material she shoots in twelve days and she knows it, and she shoots it anyway because she has a producer in Tehran and a commissioning body called the Society for Assistance, and this is the footage that will make the case that money is required.

The queue forms at nine.

It runs from the clinic door down the length of the north path and there are perhaps ninety people in it, and it is entirely silent, and it does not move for the first forty minutes because the doctor is doing the bed cases first. Nobody complains. Nobody sits down, though there is a wall. They stand in the sun in a line with their hands at their sides and wait.

Inside, at a table by the window, Meshkat works fast and well.

He is fifty-odd and tired and not unkind. He does eleven examinations an hour. He has a nurse from the town with him and two of the residents assisting, and Parvaneh films him filing dead tissue from the sole of a man's foot with an instrument like a rasp, calmly, the way a carpenter works a joint, while the man watches with interest and no expression at all and holds the leg steady himself.

She films a woman lying flat on a bench with her arms straight out while the nurse builds a stack of weighted pads across both hands.

It looks, in the frame, exactly like a burial. It is in fact a good treatment, gentle and old and effective, and it will be in the film with no explanation and half the audiences in Europe will read it as a punishment.

And she films the cabinet.

It is behind Meshkat's left shoulder for the whole of the clinic sequence: a metal press, painted the same white as everything, with three shelves visible through the glass and a lock. It is in shot for nineteen seconds in the finished film. She never asks about it. There is no reason on earth for her to ask about it; it is a medicine cabinet in a clinic, and there is a doctor standing in front of it, and the entire argument of the film she is making is that these people have been abandoned without treatment.

What she does ask, at the end of the day, standing outside while the Land Rover turns round in the yard, is what the queue was for.

'The monthly,' says Ozra.

'They get it every month?'

'Every month for as long as anyone here can remember.'

Parvaneh is aware of a small wrongness and cannot get at it, and she is tired, and the light has gone, and she has three hundred feet in the can that will move a committee to tears.

'Then why is nobody better?' she says.

And Ozra, who has answered every other question in four days immediately and in beautiful Persian, does not answer for a moment.

Then she says: 'Because we are in the cold season.'

Parvaneh laughs, because it is April and warm, and takes it for what it plainly is — a country woman's turn of phrase, fatalism, the kind of thing you write down and use later.

She does write it down. It is in the notebook, on the fourth page, in her hand.

Under it, that same night, she writes a line of verse, and thirty-four years later a man will find both on the same page and understand

that she came within one question of the entire thing on the fourth day and asked something else instead.

PART THREE — THE QUIET

13 • Three and a Half Minutes

*They tell me about a garden.
All of them. The same garden.
Dry, with water down the middle
and something red at the far end.
I ask a blind man to describe the wall
and he describes my wall,
the one in the house where I was a girl,
and I write it down as folklore
because I am a coward with a notebook.*

There is a stretch of the film that nobody writes about.

It runs from about nineteen minutes to twenty-two and a half, and every essay I have ever read on that film treats it as the low point — the passage where a great artist, exhausted at the halfway mark, put in some landscape. One critic in the seventies called it a breath. Another called it the film's only lapse into the picturesque.

It is three and a half minutes of people sitting down.

There are eleven separate setups in it. An old man on a step against a whitewashed wall. Two women on a low bench with a basket between them that neither of them is doing anything with. A young man in a doorway. Somebody's grandmother in the shade of the poplars. There is no dialogue and no narration over it and Parvaneh cut it against a single sustained note of a reed instrument that she recorded in the yard and slowed down.

The people in it are not asleep. Their eyes are open. They are not looking at anything.

I have run those three and a half minutes more than any other section of the film and until this year I would have told you exactly what the critics told you: rest, dignity, the poetry of ordinary time.

Here is what is actually in it.

In eleven setups over three and a half minutes, nobody moves.

I want to be exact about what I mean, because it sounds like nothing. Put a camera on a human being who is sitting still and doing nothing and time them. In a normal adult you will get, on

average, something between four and nine seconds before something happens — a hand goes to the face, a foot changes its weight, the head resettles, somebody swallows and you see it, somebody scratches. This is not restlessness. This is the standard operating condition of the species. We are being spoken to constantly by our own skin and we answer every time, and we do it so continuously that we have no idea we are doing it, and it is the single hardest thing to fake in a performance. Directors know this. It is why still extras look dead.

The longest unbroken take in that sequence is fifty-one seconds. It is the old man on the step. In fifty-one seconds he blinks four times and does nothing else at all.

Not stillness in the sense of composure. Stillness in the sense of a photograph that somebody has left running.

I counted it eleven times, on eleven different people, across three and a half minutes of film, and the shortest of them is nineteen seconds and the average is a fraction over thirty.

And they are all doing something. That is the thing you can see once you know to look and can never unsee afterwards. It is not vacancy. There is a slight — I can only describe it as a *lean*. A very small forward attention, the face of a person listening to something at a distance in a language they know well.

Willem came in while I had the old man up on the bench in April and looked over my shoulder for a while.

‘What is he doing?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He’s dead,’ Willem said, cheerfully, and went to the window, and touched the radiator, and came back.

Eleven minutes later he did it again. I timed it. I have timed him for years without ever once asking myself what the number meant.

14 • The Wall

*A man walks the length of the wall with his hand out
and a voice recites the days of the week
over and over until they lose their edges
and become a kind of water.
I filmed him for ninety seconds
because I thought it was the saddest thing I had ever seen.
He was working.
I have never worked like that in my life.*

Day Five, in the afternoon, in the flat white light after lunch when the House goes quiet, Parvaneh finds the blind man at the wall.

His name is Khodadad and he is somewhere past sixty and he has been blind for nine years. He walks the northern wall from the poplars to the corner and back, with his right hand out, the backs of the fingers just touching the whitewash, and he does it slowly, and he does it for a long time.

She sets up at the far end and lets it run. Ninety seconds, unbroken, no cut, the longest single take in the film.

Over it, in the finished version, there is a voice reciting the days of the week — Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday — around and around, flat, without inflection, until the words come apart. It is the most quoted thirty seconds she ever made. People write about it as an image of pure monotony, of time going nowhere in a place where nothing can change.

What is actually happening is this.

She asks Ozra, that evening, what he is doing out there.

‘Walking.’

‘For an hour?’

‘He does not know it is an hour,’ Ozra says.

‘Then what does he think it is?’

And Ozra looks at her for a moment and says: ‘Would you like me to ask him?’

They go out. He is still there. It is nearly dark. Ozra says something to him in Azeri and he laughs — a short surprised bark of a laugh — and answers at some length, and Ozra translates, and this is the exchange as Parvaneh records it in her notebook that night, and it is the exchange that later, in an editing room, she will decide is too oblique to use and will leave on the floor.

He says: tell her I am not walking, I am arriving.

He says: the wall is how I get out.

He says: I am sorry, it is not a thing that can be said in Persian.

Parvaneh writes underneath, in her own hand: *Sufi? — ask O. tomorrow, gently. Query: is there an order here. Query: who leads it.*

She does ask. What she gets, over the next three days, in pieces, is the first outline of the thing the House does not put in front of the camera because it does not occur to anyone that it would be of interest.

They call it *khāmūshī* [khaa-moo-SHEE]. The Quiet.

Ozra explains it the way you explain a local craft to a visitor — with a certain flatness, mild pride, no mysticism at all. Parvaneh, who has met a great many mystics in Tehran and has a low opinion of most of them, finds this reassuring and writes that down too.

The argument, as Ozra gives it, in the school room, in Persian, with the exercise books stacked between them:

Nobody outside this wall has ever held a single unbroken thought. Not one. In an entire life. The body will not permit it. You are interrupted every few seconds — an itch, a knee, a dry throat, a hand that wants to move — and you attend to it, always, immediately, without ever noticing that you have. You have never once been alone in a room with your own mind. You have only ever been in a room with your mind and something shouting at it.

And it is not the shouting that is the price, Ozra says. It is that a person who is interrupted every four seconds cannot go more than four seconds into anything. Not into a thought. Not into grief. Not

into prayer. You live in a very shallow country and you have never seen the edge of it, and you believe the country is that size.

'And here?' Parvaneh says.

'Here it went quiet,' Ozra says. 'And then we could hear how far it goes.'

'That is a cruel bargain.'

'Yes.'

'And you would not undo it.'

Ozra stacks the exercise books, taps them square on the desk, sets them down with two hands.

'You are asking whether I would like to be interrupted again,' she says.

15 · The Same Garden

*He was a young man once
with a camera and a girl in Tehran
and eleven days of stock
and the whole thing in front of him,
and he says now that they were extremely pleased with themselves.
I would like to have known him then.
I would like to have known anybody then.*

Second visit to Cologne, June, and this time I took the trims.

He had a projector. Of course he had a projector; he was eighty in a year and living alone and he had a 16mm projector on the sideboard the way other men that age have a fishing rod. We put a sheet up on the balcony door and ran the sit-still sequence twice, and then I ran the trims of it, which are nineteen minutes long.

Nineteen minutes. She shot nineteen minutes of people sitting down and cut three and a half.

Jalil watched it all the way through with his hands on his knees.

'I remember the afternoon,' he said. 'I remember complaining. I said to her, we are burning stock on old men sleeping in the sun.'

'What did she say?'

'She said they are not sleeping.' He took his glasses off and cleaned them on the cardigan. 'She said it in a particular way. I did not follow it up, and I have thought since that this is the single largest failure of my professional life, and there is a lot of competition.'

I asked him what he had understood about the Quiet at the time.

'Nothing. I did not know the word until you said it on the telephone.' He said this without embarrassment. 'You must understand what we thought we were doing, boy. We thought we were making an argument. The argument was: these people have been abandoned, this is curable, give money. That was the film. Everything that was not the argument was texture.'

'She filmed nineteen minutes of texture.'

'She filmed nineteen minutes of something she could not name and did not have room for,' he said. 'That is what a director's floor is. It is all the things that were true and did not fit.'

Then he said: 'Ask me about the garden.'

I had not mentioned a garden.

I want to set down precisely what happened in the room at that point, because it is the moment the ground moved and I have been careful with it since.

I said: what garden.

And Jalil said that on the sixth or seventh day he had been sitting on a step with a resident, waiting for the light, and had made conversation, and had asked the man — idly, with no interest, the way you ask anyone anything at four in the afternoon — where he went when he sat like that.

And the man had described a garden.

'A walled garden,' Jalil said. 'Dry. Not green. Water down the middle in a stone channel and something red at the far end, a pomegranate, he said pomegranate. And I said, that is a nice garden, is it a garden you knew as a boy, and he said no. And I thought nothing of it whatsoever.'

He put his glasses back on.

'And then two days later I asked a woman the same question because I had run out of things to say. And she described the same garden.'

'The same.'

'The channel. The pomegranate at the far end. The wall.'

'They live together,' I said. 'They talk. It's a story they tell each other, it's a shared —'

'Yes,' said Jalil. 'That is what I said to myself for thirty-four years and it is a perfectly good answer and I would like you to have it, and I am going to spoil it for you now because I am old and I have wanted to tell somebody this since 1962.'

He said the woman had told him where in the garden she stood.

Near the wall, on the left-hand side, she said. She had never gone past the water.

And Jalil, being twenty-six and bored and rather pleased with himself, had gone back to the first man on the following morning and had said: do you know so-and-so, and the man said yes. And Jalil said: where does she stand?

And the man said: near the wall on the left. She does not come past the water.

16 • Eleven Answers

*There is a place they all go
and they can put each other in it
the way you put a chair in a room you know.
I asked what it looks like
and eleven people told me the same garden
and I wrote: shared folklore, cf. dream studies, ask Dr H.
I have been a coward in three languages.*

Day Six. She spends it collecting descriptions and does not tell Jalil why.

She has a method for this, from journalism, from before: never ask two people in the same room, never repeat back what the last one said, never use a leading word. She asks eleven residents that day,

singly, in the yard and the kitchen and the doorway of the bathhouse, one question in Persian with Ozra nowhere near her.

When you sit in the afternoon — where do you go?

Eleven answers. She numbers them in the notebook.

All eleven describe a walled garden. Nine of the eleven volunteer the watercourse without being asked. Seven volunteer the pomegranate. Two say only that there is something red at the end and they have never got close enough to see it.

Six of them place themselves in it — near the wall, by the water, at the shaded end — and four of the six name other residents and place them too. She cross-checks three of those. They agree.

She writes, that evening, in an entry that is still in the notebook and that I have photographed and have on my desk:

Not a vision. Nobody claims it is holy. Nobody claims it is God. They discuss it the way villagers discuss the road to the next town. O. says it is simply what is there when nothing else is. She will not say more and does not think it interesting. She thinks I am asking about it for the same reason a foreigner asks about carpets.

And underneath, in smaller writing, pressed harder:

Sensory work. They cannot feel their bodies. There is nothing coming in. So something comes out — brain filling silence, standard, I have read this. But then why the same garden. Eleven people. Why the same garden.

And then, right at the bottom of the page, six words:

Do not put this in the film.

She never wrote down her reason. I have thought about it for months.

The generous reading is that she was protecting them. She had come to make an argument that would loosen money out of a committee, and a colony of people who see a shared garden is a colony of mystics, and mystics do not get money, they get anthropologists.

The other reading is that she was frightened.

I incline to the second, and here is why. On the same page, in the same ink, she has written a line of verse that did not go into any collection and that I found nowhere else in her papers, and it reads:

I have asked eleven people where the wall is and they have all described my mother's kitchen.

17 • The Guest

*Somebody stands behind them
and has stood there thirty years
and no one has turned in time.
They are not frightened of him.
They set a place.
When they call me guest
I thank them in the polite form
and go on believing
the word means me.*

I am going to do this part badly. I have started it four times.

The medicine is straightforward and I want it on the table first, because it is the whole of the explanation and it explains nothing.

When the wires die, they do not go silent politely. They misfire. They send signal with no cause behind it — a burn where there is no fire, ants under skin that has nothing on it, and above all the sensation of being touched. This is ordinary and it is documented and it happens to people all over the world with damaged nerves, and the most common single form it takes is a hand laid flat on the body. Patients report it in hands they no longer have. It is not a mystery. It is a fault in a wire, and the brain, which cannot tolerate signal without a source, supplies one.

So: two hundred and ten people, in one enclosure, in partial permanent silence, in a state they have practised daily for thirty years, all of whom are periodically touched by nothing.

Of course they named it.

They call him *mehmān* [meh-MAAN]. The guest. The one who is received.

He stands behind you. He is always behind you, on the left, at about the height of a hand on a shoulder, and nobody in the history of that House has ever turned round in time. They are not afraid of him. This is the part I cannot make sit still. Every account Jalil has, every account in the trims, every account Firouzeh eventually turned up in a doctoral thesis from 1974 that nobody has cited since — they describe him without dread. Something between a lodger and a relative. Somebody who is simply in the house.

The children are taught not to try to turn round, because trying puts you out of the Quiet, and turning is what a body does when it is startled, and being startled is the outside world's disease.

And Parvaneh Kamrani was called *mehmān* to her face, in Persian, by everybody in that compound, for twelve consecutive days.

I have gone back through the sound reels. It is there ninety-one times. Ozra says it in the first thirty seconds she is on tape. The children shout it across the yard. It is on the cut of the wedding, twice, in the singing. It is a completely ordinary word — you would say it to a plumber — and it means guest, and there is no reason on earth for anybody to hear anything else in it, and she wrote in her notebook on the first night that they were a hospitable people who used the polite forms.

They were not being polite.

They were telling her, ninety-one times, in a word she knew, what she was.

I do not know what to do with that. I have tried to make it mean that they were mocking her and it will not hold — there is no mockery anywhere in that sound. I have tried to make it mean nothing, coincidence, a language having one word for two things, and it will not hold either, because on the raw reel of the wedding a woman says it while looking directly into the lens and then laughs, and everybody around her laughs, and the laugh is warm.

The nearest I can get is this, and it took me until August.

They did not think she was the Guest.

They thought the Guest had come.

18 • Six or Eight Minutes

*Twelve days is nothing.
Twelve days is a fortnight of somebody else's weather.
I will go home with four hundred rolls
and a boy, and a reputation,
and for the rest of my life
when a room goes quiet
I will look at the doorway.*

Day Six, evening, and this is the only time in twelve days that Parvaneh does it herself.

There is no footage. Jalil is asleep. It is in the notebook, on one page, and it is the reason I believe every other word in that notebook.

She writes that she went out after the Looking and sat on the low wall at the north end, near the poplars, because it was warm and because she had a headache and because she had spent the day asking eleven people about a garden and had frightened herself.

She writes that she decided to try it. She writes that she felt ridiculous. She notes that she had done a certain amount of this sort of thing in Tehran with people she describes, in a phrase I like very much, as *serious about being serious*.

She sat for what she estimated afterwards was between six and eight minutes.

And she writes — and this is the whole of it, and it is four lines, and she never told a living soul, and it did not go into any interview or any letter I have found in thirty-four years of a well-documented public life:

Nothing happened. I want that recorded. Nothing happened and I was relieved. And then when I got up my shoulder was wet where I had been leaning against nothing, and I stood in the dark and put my hand on it, and I have been sitting here with the lamp on for an hour and a half.

O. came out about ten and found me and did not ask. She said: it takes most people a year. She said it as a kindness.

I am not going to think about this. I have six days left and a film to make and I am not going to think about this.

I asked her who he is. She said: nobody has turned round in time. I said that is not an answer and she said no, and she went in.

That is the last entry for Day Six.

The next page is Day Seven, and it is entirely about lens choices for the bathhouse, and it runs to nine hundred words, and it is the most technical passage in the entire notebook.

I know exactly what that page is. Anyone who has ever been frightened at three in the morning and got up and cleaned a kitchen knows exactly what that page is.

PART FOUR — THE HANDLING

19 • Counting Hands

*I have counted hands for six weeks
and told myself it is an editing exercise.
A man who counts hands is doing arithmetic.
A man who cannot stop counting hands
is doing something else,
and there is nobody in this building at two in the morning
to tell him which.*

I started counting hands in July and I did not admit to myself what I was counting for until the middle of August.

It began as method. This is what I want to be clear about, because everything I did that summer had the shape of work and none of it was. When you find one deliberate thing in a film — the doubles, the retakes, the notes — the discipline is to widen out and look for others, and the widening is boring and slow and looks exactly like ordinary restoration. I was building a shot log. Setup, duration, subjects, coverage. Four hundred and six entries. Willem thought I had a grant.

And on about the fourth night of it I noticed that the boy is in the film thirty-one times.

Thirty-one. In forty minutes. Out of forty-odd children in that compound.

He is never the subject. That is the thing. He is not filmed once — not one frame in which the camera is pointed at him, not one shot that is about him, not one moment of coverage that anybody could describe as his. He is carried across the corner of a shot. He is in the third row at the back. He is at the edge of the bathhouse frame with his back to us. He is out of focus behind a woman's shoulder, nine times, in nine different setups, on eight different days.

Thirty-one appearances, none of them intended.

I went through every other child in the film. The highest is a girl of about nine who is in it eleven times, and she is in it eleven times because she is bold and funny and follows the camera and does handstands, and Parvaneh clearly liked her, and she is *the subject* in four of them.

Nobody else gets past six.

I want to explain what that means to somebody who has not done this work. If a child appears in the accidental margins of thirty-one out of four hundred and six setups over twelve days, it is not because the cameraman liked him. It is because wherever the camera went, he was already there.

Which means somebody knew where the camera was going.

There are two possible readings and I sat with both for a fortnight. The first is that he was a curious, sticky five-year-old who followed the strangers around all day, which is what five-year-olds do, and which would produce exactly this distribution. That reading is good. That reading held for nine days and I was grateful for it.

Then I plotted the thirty-one against the shot log by time of day.

He is in the morning setups and he is in the late-afternoon setups. He is in eleven of the thirteen setups shot in the last hour of light. He is in none — not one — of the eight setups shot between one and three in the afternoon.

A child who follows strangers around does not observe a siesta.

I went and looked at what happens in this House between one and three. Nothing happens. It is the flat white hour. It is the hour when the whole place sits down and goes quiet, and it is the material she cut to three and a half minutes.

The boy is not in the Quiet.

He is five, and he is the only child in the compound who goes round at the Looking, and he has been given a token with a number on it, and he is in thirty-one shots he was never pointed at — and in the one hour of the day when every adult in that place goes somewhere he cannot follow, he is put away.

Not brought. Put away.

I sat in the cold room and worked out, on the back of a shot log, that if you wanted to raise a child inside a practice without ever letting him watch it being done, and then have him do it his whole life while believing it was his own idea, that is precisely how you would arrange his afternoons.

20 • Beautiful Things

*Name some beautiful things, she says,
and forty children shout at once
the moon, the sun, flowers, playtime,
and I have my hand over my mouth in the doorway
like a woman at a funeral
who has just been told a joke.
Name some ugly things.
And the room thinks about it properly.*

Day Seven. The classroom. Two rooms, forty-one children, one teacher, and the light coming in from the left through windows with no glass in the upper halves.

Parvaneh gets eleven minutes of it and cuts four, and it is the four minutes that made the film immortal, and every word of what follows is on the reel.

Ozra teaches standing. She has an exercise book she never opens. She asks them arithmetic first and they answer it well, and there is a boy at the back who is quicker than the rest and knows it and has to be sat on twice.

Then she says: name some beautiful things.

They go off like birds. All at once, competitively, over each other, the way children answer when the answer is free — the moon, the sun, flowers, the garden, playtime, my mother, God, the sun again, and somebody at the back shouts *bread* and gets a laugh.

Parvaneh is standing in the doorway with the camera running and her free hand over her mouth. Jalil has described her doing this to me twice and both times he described the hand.

Then Ozra says: name some ugly things.

And here is what is on the reel, and what is in the film, and what people in Frankfurt and Montreal and Bombay have sat in the dark and heard.

The room goes quiet.

Not shy-quiet. Working-quiet. Forty-one children think about it properly, and it takes four or five seconds, which on film is a very

long time. And then a small boy in the front row says, without any drama at all, in the voice of a child giving a correct answer to a question he has understood:

Hand.

And then: foot.

And then, after a beat: head.

Nobody laughs. One girl nods.

And then Ozra says — and this is the moment the whole picture turns over, and it is why the film is what it is — she says: *now make me a sentence with the word house in it.*

And a boy near the window says the sentence that gave the film its name.

Four minutes. That is what is in the film, and it is perfect, and I have never in my life met anyone who has seen it and forgotten it.

Now.

There are eleven minutes in the trims, and the four in the film are minutes two through six, and I want to describe minute nine.

In minute nine the arithmetic is over and the beautiful things are over and Ozra has the children copying letters. The camera is at the back of the room on a wide lens because Jalil has moved to get the light. Forty-one children with their heads down. It is a static shot of a classroom and there is no reason for anybody ever to look at it.

Along the back row, behind the children, four adults are sitting on the bench against the wall.

This is normal. Parents come in. There are always two or three adults at the back of that room on any given day and they are in a dozen setups across the twelve days.

The boy is at the end of the back row.

Over the course of minute nine he is lifted by the first woman and set on her lap and she looks at his hands — palm, back, between each finger, the full sequence, exactly as it is done at the Looking

— and she takes about forty seconds, and she talks to him the whole time, and he is bored and wants to get down.

Then she passes him to the man beside her.

Then that man passes him to the woman beside him.

Then that woman passes him to the fourth.

Four adults. Four minutes. In one static wide shot, in focus, in the background of a classroom, while forty-one children copy letters and a teacher walks between the desks.

I identified all four against the clinic sequence. It took eleven days.

Three of the four are among the worst cases in that House. Not the worst-looking — I checked myself very carefully on that, because it would be easy to select for the camera. The worst: the three whose hands and faces show the furthest progression of anybody who appears in the film, which means the three who have carried it longest and heaviest, which means the three most likely in that entire compound to give it to somebody.

The fourth is Golnaz from the kitchen.

He eats in her kitchen every day between the two firings, with the doors shut against the flies.

It is not cruelty. I need to write that down and I need to leave it standing. There is nothing in minute nine that looks like cruelty and nothing in it that is cruelty. The woman who has him first is delighted with him. She is talking to him the entire time and at one point she puts her forehead against his forehead, which is a thing my daughter did to my son when he was small, in a kitchen in Rotterdam, in 1988.

They loved him. That is not in tension with any of it. That is the mechanism.

You cannot do four years of this to a child you do not love. Nobody could hold their nerve. It requires, absolutely requires, that everybody involved be doing something they experience as tenderness — and the genius of it, if that is the word and I do not think it is, is that the thing they were doing *was* tenderness. There is no gap between the two. The handling and the love are the same

set of movements, performed by the same hands, at the same time, and they cannot be separated by any method I know.

That is what has been screening at festivals since 1963.

21 · Four Frames a Second

*I have looked at this four times a second
for eleven days,
which is longer than she was ever there.
At four frames a second
a hand takes a very long time to arrive.
I have watched a woman reach for me
for eleven days
and I still cannot make myself flinch.*

I ran minute nine at four frames a second for the first time on the ninth of August, at about eleven at night, and I finished at ten past four in the morning, and Els found me in the cold room at seven.

I am going to set down what that is like, because I have read a great many descriptions of people discovering terrible things about their childhoods and none of them have been accurate about the tedium.

Four frames a second is not slow motion. Slow motion is a thing you watch. Four frames a second is a thing you administer. You sit at a flatbed with your hand on the control and the image advances in small discrete jerks, and after ten minutes your eye stops seeing movement at all and starts seeing a sequence of unrelated photographs, and after an hour you are no longer watching a film. You are auditing.

So there is no horror in it. That is what nobody tells you. It took five hours and it was not a nightmare, it was clerical, and I made two cups of coffee during it and drank neither.

What I did was build a table.

Column one: the frame number. Column two: which adult. Column three: which part of the child. Column four: duration in frames, converted to seconds.

I have the table. It is one page. It sits in the drawer with the token.

Woman one: hands, both, palm and dorsum and interdigital, 41 seconds. Forehead contact, 3 seconds. Face, 12 seconds.

Man: hands, both, 22 seconds. Then he holds the boy's right foot in his lap, without the shoe, for 74 seconds, while talking to the woman beside him.

Woman two: face and neck, 31 seconds. She wets her thumb in her mouth and cleans something off his cheek, which takes 4 seconds, and which is the single most ordinary gesture in the entire film, and which I had to get up and walk to the window for.

Golnaz: 90 seconds. She simply holds him. There is no inspection at all. He falls asleep against her at frame 12,433 and she sits there with him for the rest of the take.

Total: four minutes and eleven seconds of continuous contact, in one shot, on one day, of twelve, in the fifth of five years.

And at ten past four in the morning I found the thing I had not been looking for and had, I now understand, been looking for the entire time.

The wide shot has forty-one children in it and Ozra walking between the desks.

She never once looks at the back row.

Not one time in eleven minutes. And a teacher in a room with four adults sitting on a bench behind her class looks at them — you cannot not look at them, they are adults in your room, you check them the way you check a door you thought you had shut. She goes up and down the aisles. She turns at the end of each row. Her eyeline goes to the children, the window, the board, the children, the doorway where the camera is, the children.

Eleven minutes and her head never turns to the back wall.

That is not inattention. Inattention is random. Eleven minutes of a person's eyeline never once falling on the four most conspicuous objects in her own room is *work* — it is as hard as anything an actor is ever asked to do, and she did it in a wide shot, cold, at nine in the morning, while conducting a class.

She was not avoiding looking at them.

She was avoiding drawing the camera.

An eyeline is a signpost. It is the first thing you learn in a cutting room: an audience goes where the people in the frame go. If Ozra had glanced at the back bench even once in eleven minutes, Jalil would have panned, because a cameraman follows a look the way a dog follows a hand, and there would be four minutes of coverage of what was happening on that bench, and the whole thing would have been on the record in 1963 in the most-watched documentary ever made in that country.

She held her eyeline off her own son of a colony for eleven minutes to prevent a pan.

Els came up at seven with tea and found me sitting in front of a frozen frame of a classroom with a page of arithmetic in front of me, and she looked at the screen for a while, and she said: 'What am I looking at?'

And I said: 'Children copying letters.'

That is what I said to my wife. Word for word. Sixteen years, and a woman who is better at difficulty than I am, standing in a cold room at seven in the morning with two cups of tea, asking me the only question that mattered.

Children copying letters.

I have apologised for a number of things since. I have not been able to apologise for that one, because to apologise for it I would have to explain it, and every time I get near explaining it I hear myself starting to make the case.

22 · Steam

*The steam takes the edges off everybody
and for twenty minutes in that room
there is no difference between us,
which is the only true thing I have filmed,
and I will cut it to fourteen*

*because the committee needs to be moved
and not undressed.*

Day Eight. The bathhouse, and it is the hardest day of the twelve for her and the best material she gets.

It is a low domed room with a stone floor and two pools and light coming down through thick glass discs set into the roof, so that the steam is full of columns. It runs for the women in the morning and the men in the afternoon and the children go with whoever will take them.

She gets twenty-two minutes and cuts fourteen and it is the sequence people mean when they say the film is tender.

Bodies in steam. Backs being washed. An old woman having her hair combed out by a younger one, taking a very long time. Two men shaving each other, which is done there because a man who cannot feel a blade does not shave himself, and which she films in one unbroken take of ninety seconds — the concentration on the face of the man doing the shaving, the absolute stillness of the man being shaved. Someone singing three notes and giving up.

And the whole of it, every part of it, is also the Looking. In water, in steam, without shoes, with everything visible. It is the same inspection she filmed on the walls on the second evening; it is simply that in here it does not look like inspection, it looks like a bathhouse.

The boy is in eleven minutes of the twenty-two.

He is handled by six adults over that period, four of whom also appear in the classroom bench and in the Looking sequences. He is scrubbed and passed and lifted and dried and passed. He is entirely happy. At one point he is put up on somebody's shoulders and paraded round the pool and there is a shot of this from below, through steam, in a column of light, that is one of the most beautiful images she ever made and that is in the film at seven seconds.

Parvaneh, on that day, in that room, does the thing that will define her afterwards.

She takes her shoes off and goes in.

Jalil has told me this twice and it is the only part of the story where he becomes difficult to talk to. She left the camera with him at the door and walked into the water in her clothes, and she was in there for the better part of an hour, and she was washed by two women and she washed one of them, and everybody in that bathhouse understood exactly what she was doing and why, and it was not a small thing in 1962 and it is not a small thing now.

It is the reason they trusted her. It is the reason the film has what it has. Every account of her courage rests on that hour and every account is correct.

‘She came out,’ Jalil said, ‘and she sat on the step in her wet clothes and she said to me: they are not contagious, Jalil, and I said, madam, we do not know that, and she said: I have decided.’

She was right, incidentally. She was right by a wide margin. Nineteen people in twenty cannot catch it under any circumstances, and an adult in a bathhouse for an hour is at essentially no risk, and she went to her grave nine years later without a mark on her.

The boy sat on the step next to her afterwards while she dried, and she put her arm round him, and it is on the reel because Jalil left the camera running on the doorway to get the steam.

Twenty-eight seconds. The two of them on a step. She is looking at nothing and he is picking at the stone.

It is not in the film. She cut it because she is in it, and she had a rule about that.

23 · The Price

The doctor is a kind man in a kind room.

The teacher was a kind woman in a kind room.

I would like somebody to explain to me

the difference between them,

slowly,

in a language with no future tense.

I have to put the drugs in here, because the chronology matters and because I have been avoiding it for four chapters.

I took them from the middle of June. Three of them, one of which turns your urine and your tears orange, which nobody had warned me about, and I discovered in a lavatory at the customs shed and had to sit down on the floor.

They work. That is not in doubt. Within about eight weeks the thing was arrested and by autumn the specialists were using the word cured in the loose way they use it, meaning that the bacterium was dead and everything from here is management.

The patch on my forearm did not come back. That is not how it works. The wire is dead; the wire does not regrow. I have a playing-card-sized area on the outside of my left arm that will be discreet for the rest of my life, and I have been told, and believe, that this is an extraordinarily good outcome, and that men who were born where I was born and found their first patch at forty do not generally walk away with a playing card.

I want to record that I was grateful for about six days.

Then I began to be unable to take them in the mornings.

Not a decision. I would like it to have been a decision, because a decision can be examined. What happened was that I would put the boxes on the table and make coffee and go up to the cold room and at eleven at night realise I had not taken them, and this happened four times in a fortnight, and I am a man who counts frames for a living.

The second thing was worse and I noticed it in August.

I sat down at the flatbed one night in the first week and could not get in.

That is the only way I can put it. The thing I have done every working day since I was twenty-three — sit, look, go down into it, come up four hours later — did not happen. I sat in front of a frame for forty minutes and it stayed a frame. And at some point in the second hour my hand went to my face, and I noticed it, and I put it

down, and eleven minutes later I got up and walked to the window and touched the radiator.

I stood there with my hand on a radiator in a cold room at two in the morning and I understood that I had never in my life done that before, and I understood what had been done to me, and I understood in the same instant that it was being taken away.

I want to be careful. I have read what I have written here and I can see the shape it is making, and I am going to name it rather than let it work on you unannounced.

I was not being taken away from anything. I had a disease and it was killing the nerves in my arm and it would have gone on to my hands and my feet and my eyes, and a man in a kind room gave me three drugs and stopped it, and every single thing about that is good.

And also: for thirty-five years I could sit still, and I cannot any more, and nobody told me that was going to be the price, and if they had told me I do not know what I would have said.

That is the sentence I could not say to Els in the cold room at seven in the morning.

Not: something terrible was done to me as a child.

I have been given something back that I was never asked whether I wanted.

24 · The Gate Is Open

*The gate stands open all day
and there is no guard on it
and nobody leaves,
and I have written three pages tonight
about how cruel it is to keep people in a place like this
and I will publish them
and be praised.*

Day Eight, the end of it, and this is the smallest scene in the book and I have put it here on purpose.

Parvaneh is sitting outside the school in the last of the light with her shoes off, drying her hair, and Ozra comes and sits down on the step below her with an exercise book on her knees, and marks it, and for a while neither of them says anything.

Then Parvaneh says: 'The gate's open.'

'Yes.'

'It's been open every day I've been here.'

'It is not locked,' Ozra says. 'It has never been locked. There is a chain on the inside for the wind.'

'Then people can go.'

'People can go.'

'Do they?'

Ozra marks two more lines and closes the book.

'Eleven have gone in thirty years,' she says. 'Four came back. Three died in the towns within the year, which is what happens; the towns are not kind and there is no work for a man with hands like ours. Two we do not know about. Two are alive somewhere and one of them writes.'

'That's not many.'

'No.'

'Why doesn't everybody walk out of that gate?'

And Ozra says: 'Because out there you cannot hear yourself think.'

Parvaneh laughs. It is on the reel — Jalil is round the corner recording room tone for the edit and the two of them are just in range, and the laugh is on the sound roll, and it is a real laugh, warm, the laugh of a woman from Tehran hearing a country proverb she likes.

'That's what everyone says about the city,' she says. 'My mother says that.'

'Yes,' says Ozra.

'And you'd tell me it's different here.'

'I would tell you,' Ozra says, 'that your mother says it and gets in the car anyway.'

There is a pause on the roll of about four seconds.

Then Ozra says: 'May I ask you something, since you have asked me many things.'

'Of course.'

'When you are old,' Ozra says, 'and it is all much worse than it is now — and it will be much worse, because it is being built, I can see it being built from here and I have never been anywhere — when it is a thousand small hands on you all day and every one of them beautiful, and people pay money for the hands and thank the people who make them. When it is like that.'

'Yes?'

'Where will you go,' says Ozra, 'to be quiet?'

And Parvaneh Kamrani, who is thirty-four years old, who has six days left in that House, who will be dead in nine years on a road outside Tehran with a suitcase in the back, says the thing that everybody says.

She says: 'I'll manage.'

PART FIVE — THE ERRAND

25 • Eleven Minutes

*Eleven minutes of a woman speaking
and I have run it a thousand times
with the sound off,
looking for a mouth like mine.
I did not look for a mouth like mine.
I looked for a face that wanted me,
which is a different search
and finds nothing.*

The eleven minutes is reel seven and it is the most famous single take in the film.

You will know it even if you have forgotten the rest. A woman sitting against a whitewashed wall with the light coming from the left, speaking directly into the lens, without a cut, for eleven minutes and four seconds. She has no eyebrows. Her hands are closed and she keeps them in her lap and does not gesture once. She is perhaps thirty and looks fifty and is, in fact, twenty-nine.

Over her, in every print, in nine languages, are eight subtitle cards. Eight, in eleven minutes, which is almost nothing — long stretches of her speaking with no card at all, and this has been written about at length and admired. The prevailing reading is that Parvaneh let the woman's voice work as music, and translated only the essential, and that the sparseness is an act of respect.

The cards say, in sequence: *I ask for nothing. My life has been given to me and I have not asked why. There is a garden. I will see it when I am done. My son is well. God is patient with us. I am not afraid. Let it be as it is.*

It is a prayer. It has been anthologised as a prayer. There is a choral setting of it by a Finnish composer.

I watched it for eleven years with the sound off, looking for my mother, and I did not find her, and I have already told you that, and I want now to say why.

I was nineteen when I started and I was looking for a resemblance. That is the entire method available to a boy with no memories: you look for a chin, a spacing of the eyes, something. And this is a

woman whose face has been rebuilt by twenty years of the disease — the brows gone, the planes of the cheek heavy and coarse, the whole architecture altered — and there is nothing on it to resemble anybody. That is not sentiment, it is anatomy. I have since put a photograph of myself at forty beside a still of her at twenty-nine and shown it to two people who did not know, and neither of them saw anything, and one of them said, kindly, *round the mouth, maybe*.

So there was no resemblance to find. Fine. That is bad luck and bad method and I forgave myself for it within about a week.

Here is what I have not forgiven.

She is the only person in that entire film who looks into the lens for longer than three seconds.

Everybody else does what people do, which is glance at it and away, or ignore it, or perform slightly. There are four hundred and six setups and I have logged every eyeline in all of them. The average direct-to-camera contact in that film is under two seconds and most of it is accidental.

She holds it for eleven minutes.

Eleven minutes and four seconds of an unbroken look down the barrel of a lens, by a woman who spent twelve days arranging her entire day so as not to be filmed, and who then sat down against a wall and did that.

A person does not do that to a camera.

You cannot. Try it. A lens is a piece of glass and there is nothing behind it and the human eye will not stay there; it slides off, it goes to the operator, it goes to the person asking the questions. To hold a lens for eleven minutes you have to be looking at something *through* it. You have to have somebody in mind, and they have to be very specific, and you have to want something from them badly enough to keep your eyes on a piece of glass in a hot afternoon while your hands lie dead in your lap.

I looked at that for eleven years and I understood it as courage.

I got Firouzeh to find me a translator in the second week of September. Not a subtitler — a linguist, from the region, with the dialect, who charges by the hour and does not ask what anything is for. I sent her a sound transfer and a note saying it was eleven minutes of an interview from a 1962 documentary and I required a literal transcript with no smoothing.

She sent it back in nine days with an invoice and a short covering letter.

The letter said: *I have done this as literally as you asked, which makes it read badly in places. I should tell you that this is not an interview. Nobody is asking her anything. She is talking to a specific person and she names the relationship four times, and I have not been able to work out from the material who she thinks is listening.*

26 • Now I Will Talk

*She sat down against the wall and would not be moved
and I thought, at last, she has decided to trust me.*

Eleven minutes.

*I had two hundred feet left in the magazine
and I let it run out*

because her face was doing something

and I have made a career

out of not interrupting a face.

Day Nine, in the afternoon, and it is Sanam who comes and finds them.

This is the reversal that Parvaneh writes about in three separate interviews across the following decade, always with the same emphasis, always as the moment the House opened: the one woman who had refused for eight days came and stood in front of her while she was changing a lens and said, in Persian, badly, having plainly rehearsed it: *now I will talk*.

They set up against the north wall of the school because the light is good there after three.

Ozra is not present. That is the fact that matters and it is the only time in twelve days it is true. Parvaneh notes it in the book without comment — *O. at the clinic, back at five* — and it is in Jalil's memory as well: he told me, twice, that when they came to do the interview he looked round for her out of habit, because for eight days she had been at his shoulder, and she was not there, and he remembers the small physical relief of it, like taking off a coat.

Sanam sits down against the wall with her hands in her lap.

Parvaneh asks her the first question in Persian and Sanam does not answer it.

She begins to speak in Azeri, straight past her, into the lens.

Jalil says he waited for Parvaneh to stop it. Any director would stop it. You have a subject who is not answering, in a language you do not have, looking at the wrong place — you cut, you reset, you explain about the eyeline. Parvaneh made a small movement with her hand which he understood, and he has spent thirty-four years not being sure he understood it correctly, and he thinks it meant: leave it.

So he left it. Four hundred feet. Eleven minutes and four seconds, which is what a four-hundred-foot magazine gives you, and it ran out, and she was still talking.

When it was over Parvaneh got up and crouched down in front of her and said, in Persian, gently: what did you tell me?

And Sanam looked at her for the first time — not at the camera, at her — and said, in Persian, the only Persian she used that day:

'You will know.'

Ozra came back at five.

Parvaneh gave her the sound roll that evening in the school room and asked her to go through it, and Ozra took it and sat with the recorder for about forty minutes with the door open, and Jalil could see her from where he was cleaning the gate of the camera, and he has told me that she made notes.

Then she came out and gave Parvaneh eight sentences.

I have the notebook page. It is in Parvaneh's hand, taken down from dictation, and there are eight of them, and they are the eight subtitle cards, word for word, that are on every print of that film in nine languages.

Parvaneh wrote, underneath: *Beautiful. Use whole take. Cards sparingly — the voice is the thing.*

She never had it checked. There was no reason to have it checked. She had a translator she had worked with for eight days who had rendered forty other exchanges accurately and helpfully and in beautiful Persian, and who had never once been caught out in anything, and who was standing in a yard in a colony with an exercise book under her arm being helpful again.

And Ozra had, I think, about forty minutes with that tape to decide what to do, and what she did was not invent something.

That is what has kept me up. She did not invent a prayer. If you take the literal transcript and you take the eight cards and you set them beside each other — and I have, and they are on my desk — you can see her working. Every one of the eight cards is a real sentence of Sanam's, lifted out and set down clean.

There is a garden. Sanam says that. It is on the tape.

I am not afraid. She says that too.

My son is well.

She says that as well, and it is the fourth card in the film, and it comes forty seconds into the take, and a hundred thousand people have read it as a mother's reassurance from beyond a wall.

Ozra took eight true sentences out of eleven minutes and left everything that held them together, and the result is a prayer, and the result is also a lie, and there is not one false word in it.

27 · What She Actually Said

*I am not a good woman and I have never claimed it.
But I have never in my life
told anybody something that was true*

in order to prevent them from understanding.

I would not have known it was available.

Here is the literal transcript. I have cut it to what matters, which is a thing I am aware I am doing.

She begins by saying who she is and who she is speaking to. That is the first thirty seconds and there are no subtitle cards over it at all.

She says: *I am Sanam, daughter of Mohsen, of this house. I am talking to my son. You are a man now and I do not know your name.*

She says it in that order. Her name, her father's name, the house, and then the relationship, and then the thing that has taken the ground out from under me every time I have read it since September, which is that she knew they would rename me and did not know what to.

Then she says: *They tell me you will see this. They tell me it will be kept and that you will find it. I do not understand how, but Ozra understands, and Ozra is not wrong about things.*

Then she says: *I did not agree.*

She says that four times in eleven minutes. It is the spine of the whole take. She comes back to it the way a person comes back to the one thing they came to say.

She says: *I did not agree, and I want it said out loud in the open air with the machine running, because when this is over everybody here will say we agreed. We did not all agree. I am against it. I have been against it since they chose you and I am against it today and I will be against it when I am dead.*

Then, and this is card three in the film, she says: *There is a garden.*

In the film that is a woman speaking of paradise.

On the tape, what she says is: *There is a garden and I have been in it since I was a girl and I will not tell you it is a lie because it is not a lie. I have stood by the wall on the left. I have never gone past the water. And I want you to know that I would burn it. If it could be burned I would burn it, and I would burn this house, and I would burn Ozra's book, and I would take my chances with God about it,*

because a garden that costs a child is not a garden, it is a field somebody is farming.

Then there are about ninety seconds of something the linguist could not fully resolve — the recording is poor and Sanam is not composed — of which the clearest part is: *four years. Four years I have carried you into that room and given you to them and taken you back. Nobody made me. There is no one holding my arm.*

Then she says the thing that is card five.

My son is well.

What she actually says is: *My son is well today. He is well this week. He is five and he is well and he will be well for a long time, and that is the cruelty of it, that is the whole cruelty of it, you will be well for thirty years and you will not know, and by the time you know it will be an old thing that happened to a child and there will be nobody left here to shout at.*

And then, near the end, with about a minute left in the magazine, she stops and looks at the lens for a long time without saying anything — this is in the film, it is the famous pause at nine minutes forty, and it is used in three separate documentaries about her as an image of endurance — and then she says:

If you have found this you are already ill and I am already dead and there is nothing I can do for you. So I will tell you the only useful thing I know, and Ozra will hear me say it and she will not stop me, because she does not think you will believe me.

Do not do what they taught you.

You will want to. It will feel like the only thing that is yours. It is not yours. It was put in you before you could talk, and everything you have built on it you built on their ground.

Get up. Walk about. Be interrupted. Let your body pull you out of it every four seconds like a dog pulling on a rope. That is what a life is. I would give this garden and every hour I have spent in it for one afternoon of being pulled about by a body that works.

I am your mother. I am asking you for one thing and it is this. Be interrupted.

The last twenty seconds are her saying his name.

Not Dariush. She did not know that name and never would. The other one, the one they gave me in that house, and she says it eleven times, evenly, without weeping, the way you say a word into a well to hear how deep it is.

Amin.

I had never heard it. Nobody had ever said it to me in my life.

I sat in the cold room and listened to a woman say my name eleven times in a language I do not speak, and I got up, and I walked to the window, and I touched the radiator.

28 · The Field

*I have counted the rows twice
and the arithmetic does not resolve.
There are more of them under this field
than have ever stood on it,
and the woman beside me is telling me
that not one of them died of what they had.
I write: fatalism.
I have a word for everything
and the words are all slightly wrong.*

Day Ten, in the morning, and Ozra takes her to the graveyard because Parvaneh has asked four times.

It is outside the north wall, through a gap that has no gate, and it is the size of a football pitch and it is full. Low stones. No names on most of them, or names that have gone. Some of the older ground has been walked flat and is only recognisable as a graveyard because of the way people go round it rather than across.

They walk the length of it together, slowly, and Jalil follows with the camera and gets four minutes that will be ninety seconds in the film, and it is the only sequence in the whole picture that nobody in any audience has ever needed explained to them.

‘How long has the House been here?’ Parvaneh says.

'Since 1938. This was a stopping place before. There was a water tank.'

'Twenty-four years.'

'Yes.'

Parvaneh looks at the field.

She does the arithmetic again — she did it on the first day, at the gate, standing in the wind — and it comes out the same and worse, and she says nothing, and they walk.

'How many died of it?' she says at last.

And Ozra says: 'None of them.'

Parvaneh stops.

'None?'

'Nobody here has ever died of it,' Ozra says, and she says it evenly, in the tone she uses for arithmetic in the classroom. 'It does not kill you. That is not what it does. It takes the feeling out and then it stands back and lets the world do the rest.'

She points with her chin, without any drama at all, along the second row.

'Burns,' she says. 'That one, and that one, and the two beyond. A woman who did not know she was sitting against a stove. A man who put his hand into a pot to find a spoon.'

Further on: 'Feet. Four of those. A hole in a foot that nobody found, and it goes down and down, and by the time it is a smell it is in the bone.'

Then, near the wall: 'That one fell. He was blind by then. He did not go blind from the disease, you understand, he went blind because he stopped closing his eye and did not know he had stopped, and nobody was looking at him closely enough that year.'

Parvaneh has her notebook out and is not writing.

'Every single one,' she says.

'Every single one is a small thing that a body would ordinarily have shouted about,' Ozra says. 'That is what the field is. It is not a disease field. It is a field of people who were not told.'

There is a long stretch of walking after that.

Then Parvaneh says: 'And there are two hundred and ten of you.'

'Two hundred and ten.'

'There have always been two hundred and ten?'

And Ozra says: 'There is water for two hundred and ten. There is bread for two hundred and ten. The consignment is for two hundred and ten.'

She says it the way a woman says the price of flour.

Parvaneh writes it down. She writes it down as poverty — as the pitiful fixed arithmetic of a place that has been given a number by a ministry and has never been given a different one. It goes into the film as an intertitle. It is one of the four hardest facts in the picture and a committee in Tehran will read it in 1963 and vote money.

What she does not write, because it does not occur to her and there is no reason it should, is that a number which never changes is not a limit.

It is a rate.

Two hundred and ten people in a bowl of ground for twenty-four years, and a field outside the north wall that is full, and every departure followed by an arrival, and somebody keeping the count.

On the way back through the gap in the wall Ozra says one more thing, and Jalil has the camera down by then and it is only in the notebook.

'You want to know how long,' she says.

'How long what?'

'You have been looking at the field and wondering how long a person lasts here. Everybody does it. You are all very polite about it and you all do it.'

Parvaneh does not deny it.

'Nineteen years,' Ozra says. 'From the first quiet patch. Nineteen years, and then something ordinary happens to them.'

'How do you know that?'

And Ozra says: 'Because I have been writing it down since I was fifteen years old, and there is nothing else to do here, and eventually you have enough of them that it stops being a guess.'

29 • Six Weeks Before

*I have been in this room since the light went
and the light has come back
and I have not moved
and there is nobody left to be proud of me for it.*

The rest came fast after that, and it came in the wrong order, which is how these things come.

Firouzeh had sent the film permit in June with the pharmacy schedules and I had filed it without reading it properly, because in June I was looking for medicine and a permit is administration.

The permit is dated the eleventh of January 1962.

Parvaneh Kamrani's application to the Ministry is dated the twenty-sixth of February 1962.

Six weeks. The permission to film at Station Nine was issued six weeks before anybody applied to film at Station Nine, and it was countersigned by the attending physician, Meshkat, and it names the applicant.

It names her.

In January, before she had heard of the place.

There is a second document in the same file, which Firouzeh photographed because it was clipped to the first, and which is a letter from the Society for Assistance to the Ministry, dated December 1961, proposing a documentary film about the leprosy stations and recommending a director.

The Society had received, in November 1961, an unsigned letter.

I have it. It is one page, typed, no letterhead, posted from Tabriz, and it proposes that a film be made at Station Nine and gives four reasons why, all of them excellent, and then it recommends a director in a single sentence.

The sentence is: *Kamrani would do it and no one else would.*

That is all. No praise, no argument. An assessment.

I have spent a great deal of time with that letter and I want to lay out what it knows.

It knows she is available, which she was, humiliatingly, after 1960. It knows she is out of favour and that a woman out of favour will take a subject nobody else will touch. It knows the Society is looking for a film and has money. It knows, or has correctly guessed, that she is childless and had lost a custody case in 1959 that was reported in two newspapers and that she never spoke about publicly again in her life.

It does not say any of that. It says: *Kamrani would do it and no one else would.*

Somebody in a colony eleven kilometres past the end of the road, with one newspaper a month and no telephone, read the country accurately enough to select, in November 1961, from the entire film industry of a nation, the one director who would come, and stay, and film what she was shown, and go away with a child.

They did not hope a visitor would take him.

They chose a woman who could not leave without one.

The school register I got in October, and it is the smallest object in this account and the worst.

It is an exercise book. Firouzeh found it in a box of colony material that went to a provincial archive in 1974 when Station Nine was closed and demolished, catalogued as *teaching materials, misc.*, unexamined. She photographed forty-one pages and asked, in her covering note, whether this was what I wanted, because it appeared to be a class list.

Four columns, in that small upright hand.

Name. Arrival. First Looking.

And a fourth column, ruled with the others in 1958 or thereabouts, in the same ink as the ruling, headed with a word that Firouzeh translated for me as *ripeness* and that the linguist later gave me more accurately as *when it comes*.

Twenty-two children. Twenty-two dates in the fourth column, and every one of them is in the eighties or the nineties.

Nineteen of them are guesses. You can see they are guesses because they are ranges of four or five years and because three of them have been crossed out and rewritten.

Three of the twenty-two children have a note beside the name.

Sent.

Mine is the eleventh line. There is no name in the first column, only the word *Amin*, which is not a name, it is a description; it means the one who is trusted with something.

Arrival: 1957.

First Looking: 1958.

When it comes: 1994–1998.

I found the numb patch in March 1996.

And the number at the end of my line, which I took at first for a class number and which is written in the same hand and matches nothing else in the book, is 2006.

Which is stamped on an aluminium token that has been in my desk drawer since I was six years old and which I have carried through four countries and two marriages and have never once been able to explain to anybody, including myself.

30 · The Music

*There is a drum and a reed and a girl in red
and every ruined hand in this house is clapping
and I am standing at the back
with my eyes going
like a woman at somebody else's daughter's wedding*

*who has understood, halfway through the music,
exactly what she is going to do on Thursday.*

Day Eleven, and it is a wedding, and it is the best day of the twelve and everybody knows it.

The bride is nineteen and her name is Roqi and she has been got up by four women since dawn in a red so strong it reads black on the stock. The groom is twenty-two and is called Habib and is being teased so mercilessly by the men that he has stopped being able to answer.

They set up in the yard between the kitchen and the school. There is a tar and a reed and a drum, and a man who plays the drum with the flats of two hands that have no fingers on them and who is, without any argument at all, the best musician Parvaneh has recorded that year.

She films eleven minutes and cuts four and puts them at thirty-one minutes into a forty-minute picture, and it is the reason audiences leave that film in the state they leave it in. She knows exactly what she is doing. Put the joy last and the ugliness earlier and people go out into the street moved. Put it the other way round and they go out into the street uneasy, and an uneasy audience does not write cheques.

Ozra suggested the placement.

Not the cut. Parvaneh cut it herself in Tehran seven months later. But on the eleventh evening, sitting on the school step, Ozra asked her — mildly, as a woman who does not make films — whether the wedding would come early in the picture or late, and Parvaneh said she had not decided, and Ozra said: *late, I would have thought. So that they remember the music.*

And Parvaneh, who had been thinking exactly that for three days, felt the small warm pleasure of being agreed with by somebody sensible.

The dancing goes on until the light goes. There is a moment — it is in the film, it is eleven seconds — when an old woman with no hands at all is pulled into the circle by two girls and dances

beautifully, holding her forearms up, laughing, and the whole yard shouts.

Parvaneh is at the back near the kitchen wall with the camera when she notices the thing she notices.

The bride has no marks.

None. Not on the face, not on the hands, and Parvaneh has been in this House eleven days and has developed, without meaning to, the eye — she reads a hand now in half a second, the way you read a face for tiredness. Roqi's hands are the hands of a nineteen-year-old girl anywhere in the country.

The groom the same.

She asks. Of course she asks; she is a journalist before she is anything.

'Are they both from here?'

'They were born here,' Ozra says.

'Both of them?'

'Both of them. Roqi's mother is the woman who does the bread with Golnaz. Habib's father is buried out there.'

'And they —' Parvaneh does not know how to finish it politely and finishes it anyway. 'They have it.'

And Ozra says: 'They were born here.'

Which is not an answer, and Parvaneh does not notice that it is not an answer, because a drum is going and a girl in red is being lifted onto a chair and somebody has put a bowl of sweets into her hands, and because the sentence sounded like a yes and was built to.

She writes it in the notebook that night, in one line, in the middle of a page about sound levels:

Bride & groom both born in colony, both affected, no visible signs yet — early stage. God. Nineteen.

Neither of them will ever leave. Neither of them will ever be examined by anybody who is not Meshkat. They will be married in that yard in front of two hundred people, and they will have

children in that House, and their children will be looked at every evening by hands that go over them very carefully, and some of those children will go quiet by thirty and some of them will not.

And the ones who do not will be married to each other in the same yard, with the same drum, and everybody will dance.

The music is real. That has to be said and it has to stay said. Nobody in that yard is performing. Roqi is nineteen and happy and it is her wedding, and the old woman dancing on her forearms is not a symbol of anything, and the man playing the drum with the flats of his hands is simply the best musician in the province and knows it.

That is what is on the film. That is what four minutes of the greatest documentary ever made in that country consists of, at thirty-one minutes, where the audience needs it, exactly where Ozra thought it would go.

31 • Filed, Not Hidden

You will not be told.

*You will be given a room, and a door, and a long time,
and at the end of it you will walk out
holding something in your hand
and you will believe you carried it in.*

Here is the thing I have been walking around since October and I am going to put it down now in one place.

It was not concealed from me.

Every single piece of it was placed where a man like me would find it. Not a man — a man like me. That is the distinction and it is the whole design.

The film is in every archive in the world and cannot be destroyed. The trims came to me at nineteen through two lawyers, which means somebody arranged, in the sixties, that Parvaneh's material would go to the child when she died. The permit and the pharmacy schedules sat in a ministry box for thirty-four years, in order, in the same file, waiting for anybody to ask, and nobody ever asked. The register went into a provincial archive under a catalogue heading

so dull that it guaranteed its survival. Sanam's eleven minutes are the most-screened take in the film and have been playing continuously in front of audiences for thirty-four years with the truth inside them, unsubtitled, safe.

None of it was hidden. All of it was *filed*.

And the man who would eventually open it had to be a particular man. He had to have the disease, so that he would begin looking. He had to have no memory of the place, so that he could not shortcut it. He had to be sitting in front of that film for other reasons, for years, so that the material would be at hand. He had to have a profession that consisted of looking at single frames for hours without moving.

He had to be the sort of man who, on finding a numb patch on his arm, would go upstairs to a cold room instead of to a doctor.

I have gone over this a hundred times looking for the place where it could have failed, and it could have failed anywhere, and that is not the point. There were twenty-two lines in that book and three of them say *Sent*. They did not need me to work. They needed one of the three.

Ozra is on the sound rolls saying it. It is not in the film — it is room tone, it is on the end of a roll, it is her voice in a school room to somebody I cannot identify, and the linguist gave it to me in November as an afterthought at the bottom of a page of transcript.

We are not in a hurry. Hurry is a thing the body does when it is frightened of something it can feel.

And what she wanted was not a carrier. That is where I was wrong until October and it is where anybody would be wrong.

A carrier is a patient. A man sent out sick and told he is sick goes to a hospital in 1975 and is cured in a year and tells the story of his terrible childhood to two women in his twenties and is interesting, and nothing whatever happens, and the House is a sad chapter in a book about public health.

A man sent out sick and told nothing goes numb at forty and goes looking, alone, at night, for eleven months, and assembles the entire doctrine himself out of primary sources.

And a man who has assembled a thing himself out of primary sources believes it in a way that no convert on earth has ever believed anything.

They did not send a missionary. I had that wrong too, for about a month, and it flattered me.

They sent a student. And they left the curriculum in nine archives, in order, with the hardest material last, and they waited thirty-four years for him to be desperate enough to read it properly.

And there is one more thing in the register and it took me until November to see it, because I had been reading the book as a list of victims and it is not that.

Twenty-two children. Three marked *Sent*.

Nineteen not.

I had assumed the nineteen were the ones who stayed and got ill and are under that field. They are not. I checked the fourth column against the death record Firouzeh pulled from the provincial office, and of the nineteen, fifteen were alive when Station Nine was demolished in 1974 and went out into the towns with everybody else, and eleven of those are alive now.

Because they never had it.

Nineteen out of twenty people cannot catch this thing. That is the number the consultant in Rotterdam gave me in a kind room in April as a piece of good news. In a colony of two hundred and ten people living on top of each other for twenty-four years it means something else. It means that at any given moment that House contained a substantial population of entirely healthy people who had been told their whole lives that they were ill and had never been examined by anybody who was not Meshkat.

And a House of the fully quiet cannot run. Somebody has to carry the buckets and work the ovens and dig out there and hold the

mirror at the Looking. A colony where every hand has closed collapses inside a decade.

So they were kept. Married to each other in the yard, in public, joyfully, with a drum, on the eleventh day of twelve, at thirty-one minutes into the finished picture where an audience needs the music.

I have run those four minutes perhaps two hundred times since November and I cannot make myself dislike them. The bride is nineteen. The old woman dancing on her forearms is not a symbol of anything. The man on the drum is the best musician in the province.

They are the healthy stock and the wedding is the mechanism and it is the most joyful thing in the film.

I have not stopped taking the drugs. I want that on the record, because I am aware of how this reads and I am aware that a man who writes *I want that on the record* is a man who knows how it reads.

I take them. Most days.

PART SIX — THE GARDEN

32 • The Suitcase

*Twelve days, and on the last morning
I woke before the bell
and lay in the dark understanding perfectly
that I was going to do it,
and that I would spend the rest of my life
calling it a decision.*

Day Twelve. The morning.

The car is coming at eleven. Jalil is packing the cases in the yard and Parvaneh has been up since five, and she has written four pages in the notebook, and I have read them more times than is good for me.

The four pages are an argument with herself and she loses it on page two.

She sets out the case against, honestly and well: that she is thirty-four and unmarried and living in two rooms; that she has no money that is not somebody else's; that she has lost one child in a courtroom already and knows what she is like; that she is a person who takes things out of places and puts them in films and this would be the largest such taking of her life; that the boy has a mother.

That last one is one line. *He has a mother here.* She does not develop it.

And then the case for, which is one paragraph and which is not an argument at all, and which reads: *I have been in this house eleven days and I have not been able to sleep and I do not want to go back to my life. I am not taking him for his sake. I am not going to write down that I am. Whatever this is, it is mine, and I will pay for it, and it is the first thing I have wanted since 1959 that has nothing to do with anybody's opinion of me.*

Which is, I think, the most honest paragraph any adult has ever written about me.

The suitcase was packed on Day Four.

Firouzeh found the requisition. It is a colony supply note, in the small upright hand, dated the fourth day of Parvaneh's twelve, and it lists one child's clothing set, one pair of shoes to be obtained from the town, and travel documentation to be prepared.

Four days in.

Parvaneh spent seven more nights believing she was making up her mind.

The gate at eleven, and the car turning in the yard, and the whole House out for it, which she took as affection and which was attendance.

Jalil filmed the departure from behind because it was the only place to stand. That is the shot: the boy walking out through the gate towards the camera, with the wall behind him and the poplars behind that, and the light coming from the left. It is on the poster. It is the last image of the film and it is followed by four seconds of the gate and then black.

Sanam is not in the frame.

I have looked for her in every foot of that morning and she is not in any of it, and for a long time I assumed she had been kept away, and I built quite a lot on that assumption.

She was not kept away.

There is a wide shot at the end of the trims, forty seconds, panning across the yard while the car turns, and at the left-hand edge, on the roof of the kitchen where the women go to hang things, there is a figure standing quite still.

You cannot identify her. It is eleven frames and she is a hundred feet away and out of focus and the film is thirty-four years old.

But there is nobody else in that compound who would be on a roof at eleven in the morning on the day the House got what it had spent five years arranging.

She stood where she could see and where she would not be in it.

And that is the last of her. Eleven frames on the edge of a discarded pan, at the far end of a roof, watching a car go out through a gate that was never locked.

She died in 1968. Firouzeh got the record. It does not say of what and there is no grave number, because Station Nine was demolished in 1974 and the ground was cleared, and there is a state agricultural depot on it now with a concrete apron and a weighbridge, and I have seen a photograph.

I have a mother who spoke to me for eleven minutes and four seconds, in perfect confidence that I would one day be sitting exactly where I am sitting.

She was right about all of it. She was right about the House, she was right about Ozra, she was right about the thirty years and the numbness and the old thing that happened to a child with nobody left to shout at.

And she asked me for one thing.

I have not been able to do it.

33 • Most Days

*I have been careful all my life
and it has made no difference.
The cold season does not arrive.
It is simply the weather
in a house you were born inside.*

I told Els in November, in the kitchen, on a Tuesday, badly.

I had rehearsed four versions and used none of them. What came out was the medical part first, in the wrong order, starting with the good news so that she spent the first ninety seconds not understanding that there was any bad news, and then having to reassemble the whole thing backwards while I kept talking.

She let me finish. She has always let me finish; it is one of the two or three things about her that I have never deserved.

Then she said: 'Since March.'

'Yes.'

'You have known since March and you have been taking pills in this house since June.'

'Yes.'

'Where.'

'In the grey camera case.'

She went and got it. That is Els. She did not shout and she did not weep, she went upstairs and came down with the case and put it on the table between us and opened it, and there were the three boxes, and one of them was nearly full, and she looked at that one for a long time.

'This one you are not taking,' she said.

'I take them most days.'

'Dariush.'

'Most days.'

And she said the thing that I have thought about more than anything anybody has said to me in sixteen years. She said: 'Do you want to be ill?'

And I said no, and it was true, and it was not an answer, and she knew it was not an answer, and she sat down.

I gave her the rest of it over about four hours. The doubles. The cabinet and the fifth of a dose. The classroom at four frames a second. The eleven minutes and what is actually in them. The register with its fourth column and my line in it.

She is a sound editor. She has spent twenty-five years listening to things nobody else in the room can hear, and she listened to all of it without once asking me to slow down, and at the end of it she said:

'Play me the eleven minutes.'

So we went up to the cold room at one in the morning and I ran the sound roll with the linguist's transcript on the bench beside her, and she read it while she listened, and she does not have a word of the language.

At the end she said: 'She is not talking to a camera.'

‘No.’

‘She is talking to you. She knows exactly where you are sitting.’
And then, after a while: ‘She sounds like somebody leaving a message on a machine that has not been invented yet.’

Els asked the practical questions after that, in order, the way she asks about a mix. Was I infectious now — no, not within days of starting the drugs, and probably not for years before. Had a doctor said that or had I read it — a doctor, twice, and I made him say it twice. Could it be passed to the children now — no. Could it have been passed to the children before — and this is where I stopped talking.

‘Before,’ she said. ‘When.’

‘Any time in the last thirty-eight years.’

‘And how would we know.’

‘We would not,’ I said. ‘Not for years. There is no test that reaches backwards. You do not find out until somebody goes numb.’

She sat in the cold room with the transcript on her knees and the flatbed humming and she said: ‘Then we get them tested and we stop thinking about it,’ which is the sanest sentence anybody has said in this account, and we did get them tested, and both were clear, and it means very little, and she knows it means very little, and she has decided to behave as though it does not.

I have watched her decide that. It costs her about a minute every morning. I can see it happen at the sink.

That is a kind of courage I do not have and cannot learn, and it is the closest thing to what Sanam asked me for that I have ever seen a person do.

34 · Four Thousand Times

The children are asleep upstairs.

The house makes its four noises.

I have everything a man could want

and a page of arithmetic in a drawer

and I have been sitting here since ten

*teaching myself not to go
and going.*

The thing I have not written down is that I have been doing it all along.

I want to put it here, at the end, where it belongs, rather than earlier where it would have been a clue.

I have sat still every day of my life. Before the film, before the trims, before March. At twenty-three in a rented room in Utrecht with a dead job in a warehouse, at thirty in this house before the children were born, at forty in a cold room at two in the morning with an arm that had stopped reporting. Twenty minutes, half an hour. I never called it anything. If anybody had asked I would have said I was thinking, and that would have been a lie, but not a deliberate one, because there is no word available in any language I have.

And I have been in the garden approximately four thousand times.

Dry. Walled. A watercourse down the middle in a stone channel with the lip rounded. Something red at the far end that I have never got close to.

I have never once thought it was strange. That is what I need somebody to understand. It is not a vision and it does not arrive; it is simply where I am when I am not anywhere. Everybody has somewhere. I assumed everybody had somewhere. In 1981 I mentioned it to a woman I was seeing — offhand, in a car, as small talk — and she said, *that's nice, mine's a beach*, and we drove on, and I have thought about that conversation for fifteen years.

Hers was a beach. She had made it up. She had made it up that afternoon in the car, out of a holiday and a photograph, the way anybody would if you asked them, and it was hers.

Mine is a real place with an inventory.

I stand near the wall, on the right-hand side. I have never gone past the water.

And there is somebody behind me. He has always been behind me. He is behind me at about the height of a hand on a shoulder,

slightly to the left, and I have never turned round, and I have never in my life wanted to, and until October I would have told you I had simply never thought about it.

That is not true. I have known not to turn round since before I could read.

Somebody taught a five-year-old boy, in a language he no longer has, in a kitchen with the doors shut against the flies, that when you are in the quiet place you do not turn round, because turning is what a startled body does, and being startled is the outside world's disease.

And he grew up in Holland and married a Dutch woman and had two children and restored film for a living and never once turned round.

That is what four years in that House bought them. Not a belief. A belief can be argued with. They put a rule in underneath language, where I cannot get at it, and I have obeyed it four thousand times in four countries without ever once knowing there was a rule.

Since the drugs, I cannot get in.

I have tried perhaps ninety times since August. I sit down and the room stays a room, and at eleven minutes my hand goes to my face, and I put it down, and at nineteen minutes I get up and walk to the window.

It is the only thing I have ever been able to do that nobody else could, and it was not mine, and it has been taken back by a kind man in a kind room who was doing his job well.

I am aware — I want this recorded, because I have been aware of it the entire time and it has not helped — that this is exactly what she said would happen. *You will want to. It will feel like the only thing that is yours. It is not yours.*

She was right. I know she was right. I have the transcript on my desk.

And it is a quarter past one in the morning and I have been sitting in this chair since ten, not moving, teaching myself not to go.

35 • The Other Side of the Boring

*Show me the child who can sit still
and I will show you
what was done to her,
and by whom,
and with what love,
and how long they were prepared to wait.*

Bahar is fourteen and does not like me at the moment, which the books say is correct and on schedule.

She is good at everything in a way that alarms her teachers. There was a parents' evening in October where a woman who teaches her physics told us that Bahar's capacity for sustained concentration was, and I am quoting, *not normal for the age group*, and Els laughed and said she gets it from her father, and I sat in a plastic chair in a school hall and looked at the floor.

She revises with the door shut and no music. Kian cannot be in a room without a noise in it — the boy is nine and he is Willem, he is exactly Willem, up and down and touching things — and Bahar sits.

I taught her that. I remember teaching her that. She was six or seven and could not settle to reading and I sat on the end of her bed and said: do not try to make yourself. Just sit and let it get boring, and go through the boring, and there is something on the other side of the boring.

I remember being proud of the phrasing.

The other side of the boring.

I have thought since about where I got that. I did not read it anywhere. I did not learn it from a teacher. It came out of me on the end of a child's bed in 1988 fully formed in a language I learned at five, and I gave it to my daughter, and she took it, and she has been going through the boring ever since with the door shut.

We had the conversation in December, on the fourteenth, at about nine in the evening, in the kitchen, while she was eating cereal standing up because there is no other way she is prepared to eat.

I asked her, as lightly as I have ever asked anything: what do you do, when you sit like that.

And she said, with her mouth full, irritated at being interrupted for something so stupid: 'Nothing. I go to the garden.'

I did not say anything.

She said: 'It's a place. It's just a place I go, it's not a big deal, everyone has one.'

I said: 'Describe it.'

And she put the bowl down, because something in my voice had changed and she is fourteen and not stupid, and she said, carefully, watching me:

'It's dry. There's a wall all the way round. There's water down the middle in a sort of stone channel thing, and there's a tree at the far end with red on it. I don't go down that end.'

'Where do you stand?'

'By the wall.'

'Which side?'

'Left,' she said. 'I've never gone past the water. Dad, what.'

And I stood in my kitchen in Rotterdam with the fridge running and my daughter looking at me, and I asked the last question.

'Is there anyone else there?'

And Bahar said: 'There's a man who stands behind me.'

She said it the way you would say there is a radiator under the window.

'He's always there. He's behind my left shoulder. You're not supposed to turn round.' She picked the bowl back up. 'I don't know why you're not supposed to. You just aren't. Can I go, I've got French.'

36 • After

*Near the wall, on the left.
She has never gone past the water.
I have read that sentence in a stranger's handwriting
and I know which wall,
and I know which side,
and I have known for a very long time
and have called it something else.*

I have four things and I am going to set them down together for the first and only time, because I have avoided putting them on the same page since December and there is no longer any point.

One. Jalil, in Cologne, in June, describing a conversation from 1962: he asked a man in the House where a woman he had never met stood in the garden, and the man said, *near the wall on the left, she does not come past the water*, and it was correct.

Two. Sanam, on the tape, in the eleven minutes: *I have stood by the wall on the left. I have never gone past the water.*

Three. Me: near the wall, right-hand side.

Four. My daughter, in a kitchen in Rotterdam, in December 1996, thirty-four years after the film was made and twenty-two years after the House was demolished, having never seen the film, having never met a person from that country other than her father, having never heard the word: *by the wall, left. I've never gone past the water. There's a man who stands behind me.*

Her grandmother's position.

I have four explanations and I have worked on all of them and I am going to give them to you in the order of how much I would like them to be true.

The first is that I told her. Not deliberately — that I described it once, years ago, and she was small and absorbed it and rebuilt it and believes it is hers. This is by far the most likely and it is what any sensible person would conclude and it is what I would conclude about somebody else.

I have never described it to anyone. I described it once, in a car, in 1981, in nine words, to a woman who said hers was a beach.

The second is that it is a template. That a mind put into a certain state produces a certain kind of image, and that walled gardens with water down the middle are simply what human beings make when they make nothing, and there are pomegranates in half the poetry of that country and I am the daughter's father and she has my brain. This is respectable. This is the one the linguist favours, gently, in a letter she did not have to write.

It does not account for the left-hand side.

The third is that they were right. That it is a place, that it has been there the entire time, that two hundred and ten people found the door to it because their bodies stopped shouting long enough for them to hear something, and that whatever is in it stands behind you, and that my daughter has been going there since she was six because her father put her on the road.

I do not believe this. I want to be extremely clear that I do not believe this, and I have written that sentence four times and gone back to it.

The fourth is the one I actually think, most nights, at about two.

That it does not matter which of the first three is true.

Because Ozra did not need it to be a place. Ozra needed it to be transmissible, and it is, and it has been transmitted, and it went across a generation and eleven kilometres and thirty-four years and a border and a language and arrived intact in a fourteen-year-old girl who thinks it is nothing and that everybody has one.

The fifth column.

I went back to the register in January and photographed it properly and had the linguist do the headings again, because I had been working from Firouzeh's rough translation and I wanted them exact.

There are five columns. I had seen four.

The fifth is ruled with the others, in the same ink, in 1958. It has no entries. Twenty-two blank cells with a heading, and the heading is

one word, and it is written in a slightly different pressure of the same hand, which the linguist says means it was added later, and which she translated as: *after*.

Twenty-two empty boxes, ruled and headed and left blank, by a woman who died in 1969 in a colony that no longer exists on ground that is now a weighbridge.

They were not aiming at a country. They never were. There is no version of this in which two hundred and ten people in a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of a road expected to reach the world.

They were aiming at a household.

One man, one wife, two children, and whatever those children do. Small, slow, hereditary, patient beyond any human timescale, and — this is the part that I cannot get past, this is the part that gets me out of bed and walking about the house at three in the morning — indistinguishable at every stage from ordinary family love.

I taught my daughter to sit still on the end of her bed and I was proud of the phrasing.

I went back into the register one more time on the fourth of February, to photograph the fifth column properly for the linguist, and I found the last thing, and I have not slept properly since.

Three children are marked *Sent*.

I am the eleventh line. The other two are the fourth and the seventeenth.

The fourth line has no name at all, only a colony word the linguist gives as *the quiet one*, and an arrival of 1949, and a fourth-column date of 1984–1988.

The seventeenth is a girl. Arrival 1960. Fourth column, 1999–2004.

I have spent eleven months believing I was the errand. I have written that word down in this account more than once and I have turned it over and been frightened by it and, on certain nights, in a way I am not going to defend, flattered by it.

I was the second one.

There is a man somewhere who is roughly eight years ahead of me. He went numb between 1984 and 1988. He is fifty-something now. He was sent out of that House thirteen years before I was, by the same woman, with the same rule installed underneath his language, and if he is alive and if he did what I did — and there is no reason on earth to think he would not, because we were built out of the same afternoons — then he has had eight years.

Eight years of knowing.

And whatever a man does with that, he has already been doing it since before my daughter could read.

There is also a girl. She is thirty-six. Her window opens in three years.

I do not know their names. There are no names in that book. Ozra did not use names for the three, and I have understood since February why: a name is a thing that can be searched for, and she was not interested in three people. She was interested in three dates.

The fifth column is headed *after* and it is empty for all twenty-two.

Not because nothing was written in it.

Because it was not for her to write in.

37 · No Edge

I am making a list of everyone I have touched.

It was going to be a short list.

I began it at the top of the page

with the two names that are asleep upstairs

and I have not been able to write a third

because there is no third.

There is only more.

I started the list on the seventeenth of January and I worked on it for eleven days.

The idea was containment. That is what I told myself and it is not a stupid idea: I have had this thing in me since approximately 1958, it sleeps for decades, it is passed only by long close living, and

therefore the number of human beings at any real risk from me across thirty-eight years is finite and small and can be written on one sheet of paper.

I am good at lists. It is my profession. Four hundred and six setups, every eyeline, eleven days.

Here is what happened to it.

The first two names took no time. Bahar, Kian. That is the whole of the actual risk and I knew it before I picked up the pen — years of the same rooms, the same air, the same bedding, a father who has carried them and slept in chairs with them and been coughed on ten thousand times. Everything after those two names is arithmetic performed to avoid looking at those two names.

Then Els. Sixteen years.

Then my first wife, who I was with for four years in the seventies and who lives in Groningen and whom I have not spoken to since 1983, and who has three children by somebody else.

Then the woman in the car in 1981.

Then the man I shared a room with in Utrecht for nine months in 1979 whose name I cannot remember and whose face I can see perfectly.

Then Willem, who has sat four feet from me for eleven years in a cold room with the door shut and no ventilation to speak of, and who touches the radiator every eleven minutes, and who has a wife and a daughter at the university.

Then the entire second floor of the customs shed.

And this is where it stopped being a list.

Because Willem's daughter comes to the building. She came at Christmas. And Willem's wife works in a school, and my first wife's three children are grown and have children, and the woman from 1981 was a nurse, and the man in Utrecht went home to somewhere in Friesland at the end of that year and I do not know where and never will.

By the fourth evening I had a page and a half and I was writing down a hairdresser.

By the sixth I understood what I was actually doing, which is that I was trying to find the edge of it, and that I had assumed there was one, in the way you assume a room has a wall even in the dark.

There is no test that reaches backwards. There is no year I can point to and say: before this I was safe and after this I was not. The thing sleeps for five years or twenty or thirty-five, and it woke in me in March 1996, and the only honest statement I can make about when I became able to give it to anybody is that it was some time between 1958 and now, and that nineteen out of twenty of them were never at risk from me at all, and that I do not know which nineteen.

I burned the list on the twenty-eighth of January in the sink, which was theatrical and which I do not regret.

Because the list was never the problem. The list was a man doing arithmetic at a kitchen table to avoid the two names at the top of it, and the two names at the top of it are asleep upstairs, and one of them goes to a garden with a wall round it every evening with the door shut, and stands on the left, and does not go past the water, and there is a man behind her.

And I cannot warn her.

I have tried. I have sat on the end of that bed four times since December with it all in my mouth.

Because to warn her I have to explain it, and to explain it I have to describe the House, and to describe the House I have to describe what they were doing and why, and there is no version of that account in which I do not, at some point, somewhere in the fourth or fifth minute, begin to make the case.

I know what I sound like when I get to Ozra. I have heard myself do it with Els, twice, and both times Els has gone very quiet and afterwards has been careful with me for a day.

They were not monsters. They had something. It was real and I have been in it four thousand times and there is nothing else like it and the world is getting louder exactly as she said it would.

That is what I would be putting in front of a fourteen-year-old.

So I say nothing, and she sits with the door shut, and I stand in the corridor outside it some evenings with a cup of tea going cold in my hand, listening to my daughter not making any noise at all.

The House is patient.

It has been patient for thirty-eight years and it can be patient for another thirty-eight, and it is not in a hurry, and there is nobody left in it to be in a hurry, and it does not require anybody. It is running now on its own, in a kitchen in Rotterdam, in a girl who thinks everybody has a garden.

I do not know whether I completed it.

That is the thing I will not be told. Not by a doctor, not by a test, not by anybody living. Whether I was the errand, or whether I merely survived it. Whether the man behind my daughter is a fault in a wire that her grandmother had and her father has and she has inherited along with the shape of her hands — or whether he has been standing in that garden the whole time, waiting for somebody from that house to bring him another one.

And whether, when I taught her on the end of her bed to go through the boring, I was being a good father.

I think I was being a good father.

That is the worst sentence in this account and I have left it in.

38 • Sundown

*The bell goes and two hundred doors open
and the light is nearly gone
and there is nothing left to film.
Sit down. Take off your shoes.
Give me your foot.
We have a long time.*

1962. The twelfth day. Four minutes past eleven in the morning.

The car goes up over the rise and out of the bowl of ground and the sound of it thins out and stops, and the dust hangs in the air over the road for a while and then that goes too.

Ozra stands in the gate until it does.

Then she turns and walks back into the yard, and pulls the chain across behind her out of habit, against the wind, because it has never been locked and there is no lock on it.

There is a great deal to do. The bench in the school room has to go back against the wall. The wedding things have to come down. Somebody has left a bucket in the middle of the north path and she picks it up as she passes and sets it against the wall, with two hands, and releases it.

The woman on the kitchen roof comes down the outside steps at about noon and goes in and does not speak to anybody for the rest of that day or, as it turns out, for most of the following week. Nobody troubles her. There is no one in that House who does not know exactly what she has spent five years doing and exactly what it cost her, and there is a way of leaving a person alone that is itself a kind of attendance, and they are very good at it.

The afternoon goes flat and white.

At one o'clock the House sits down.

Two hundred and nine people, on steps and low walls and in doorways, in the shade of the poplars and against the whitewash, and the reed-thin sound of somebody's radio going off in a room, and then nothing. No one moves. A dog crosses the yard at ten past and lies down in the shade of the water channel and that is the only event of the hour.

They are all in the garden. Near the wall, along the left, along the right, in the shaded end. Nobody goes past the water.

Somebody is standing behind each of them.

At three the House gets up and the ordinary noise comes back — the kitchen, the school, a man calling to another man about a door — and the light lengthens and goes gold and then thin, and the poplars throw their long stripes across the roofs the way they have

thrown them across the roofs since somebody planted them for the shade.

And at sundown the boy pulls the cord and the school bell goes.

Two hundred doors open.

They come out into the last of the light and sit down in pairs, on the low walls, on the steps, on the kerbs, in the same even distribution across the whole compound, husbands and wives and two old men and a woman and a girl and two boys who are told to sit properly.

They take off their shoes.

They take each other's feet into their laps and begin to look — the sole, the heel, between each toe, the shoe turned over and shaken out and a finger run round the whole inside of it. Then the hands. Then the forearms. Then the face, with a mirror if both can see and with fingertips if not.

Somebody counts blinks.

There is talking throughout. Gossip, complaint, a boy asked about his arithmetic. It has exactly the tone of a family shelling beans on a step.

In the fourth pair from the poplars, where the last of the light is, a woman sits by herself for a while with nobody in front of her.

Then a girl of about seven comes and sits down in the space, and puts her feet up into the woman's lap, and says something, and the woman laughs and takes hold of the ankle and bends close.

Above them the poplars move.

It is twenty-five minutes to full dark, and there is no camera anywhere in the province, and there will not be another one for as long as the House stands.

GLOSSARY

Amin ah-MEEN — Arabic, via Persian. The trusted one; one entrusted with something. Not properly a given name. The name used for the boy in the House's register, and never spoken to him after he left.

Azeri a-ZEH-ree — Turkic. The Turkic language spoken across north-western Iran, including the region around the House. Distinct from Persian and not mutually intelligible with it.

Bahar ba-HAAR — Persian. Spring; the season. Dariush's daughter.

Dariush daa-ree-OOSH — Persian. Darius. The name Parvaneh chose for the boy at adoption, taken from a book.

Golnaz gol-NAAZ — Persian. Literally flower-grace. The senior of the three women who work the House's ovens.

Habib ha-BEEB — Arabic, via Persian. Beloved. The groom at the wedding on the eleventh day.

Jalil ja-LEEL — Arabic, via Persian. Great, exalted. Parvaneh's cameraman; twenty-six in 1962, seventy-eight in 1996.

Khāmūshī khaa-moo-SHEE — Persian. Silence, quietness, the state of being extinguished. In the House, the name for the sustained condition entered in the flat hour of the afternoon, and for the practice that produces it.

Khāneh KHAA-neh — Persian. House, home, dwelling. What the residents called the place. The state called it Station Nine.

Kian kee-YAAN — Persian. Of the Kayanian kings; royal. Dariush's son.

Mehmān meh-MAAN — Persian. Guest; visitor; one who is received. In the House, also the name for the presence that stands behind a person in the garden and has never been turned round on in time. Used of Parvaneh ninety-one times across the sound rolls.

Meshkat mesh-KAT — Arabic, via Persian. A niche or lamp-recess.

The government physician attached to Station Nine, who signed the monthly consignments for twenty-two years.

Negāh ne-GAAH — Persian. A look; a glance; the act of looking at.

The House's evening inspection, performed in pairs at the bell, in which each person's feet, hands, forearms and face are examined by another because their own bodies will not report injury to them.

Ozra OZ-raa — Arabic, via Persian. Virgin, maiden. The woman who ran the House's teaching. Appears in no frame of the finished film.

Parvaneh par-vaa-NEH — Persian. Butterfly; also a moth, and in classical usage the moth that circles the flame. The filmmaker.

Roqi ro-GHEE — Persian, diminutive. Familiar form of Roghayyeh.

The bride at the wedding on the eleventh day.

Sanam sa-NAM — Arabic, via Persian. An idol; in poetry, a beloved.

Amin's mother. The only interview in the film that Ozra did not translate.

Shabih sha-BEEH — Arabic, via Persian. A likeness, a resemblance; also the term for a religious passion play in which a real event is performed by people who are not the original participants.

Tar TAAR — Persian. A long-necked, waisted, plucked string instrument, played across Iran and the Caucasus. Heard at the wedding.

Rotterdam, 1996. Dariush is a film restorer who sits alone in a cold room and looks at single frames for eight hours at a stretch. In March he burns his forearm on a lamp housing and does not know it for four hours, and finds a patch of skin the size of a playing card that has stopped reporting to him.

He does not go to a doctor. He goes upstairs, in the dark, to eleven cans of film that came to him through two lawyers when he was nineteen.

The film is famous. It was shot over twelve days in 1962, in a walled colony eleven kilometres past the end of a road, by a woman who believed she was bearing witness and who came out with a child. It has been screening at festivals for thirty-four years. Audiences weep at it.

Running it frame by frame, he begins to find the things it recorded and nobody was ever meant to see. A cabinet in a clinic that was never empty. A classroom in which something else is happening along the back row, in focus, in the background, for four minutes. And eleven minutes of a woman speaking directly into the lens in a dialect nobody in the room could follow, subtitled in nine languages as a prayer.

"They did not send him out to be saved. They sent him out to be found, and they were prepared to wait thirty-four years for it."



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