

ROYA
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No. 78

BLACK OUT

خاموشی

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION



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Printed in the Reach

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

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*For everyone who lost somebody for saying a thing out loud,
or for standing where a thing was being said.*

*For the mothers who were given a form to sign and told
what to cut into the stone. For the fathers who gave the driver
the whole route and could not say the name of the place.
For the brothers and the sisters who learned to tell it in a level voice.
For the friends who had it in their pocket and did not want
to hand it over, and handed it over.*

You did not get to choose how you grieved. You were told.

You did it anyway, at night, with nine people, in the wrong words.

روی سنگ کلمه‌ای نوشتند که مال شما نبود
اما اسمی که زیر لب صدا می‌زنید، همان است
که خودتان روی او گذاشته بودید
این کتاب برای آن اسم است

In Dey 1404 the network of a whole country was switched off, and then the shooting started. The dark came first. That was the order of it, and everyone who was there knows the order.

So there are almost no pictures, and there is no number anybody can stand behind.

But it was done in front of people. Somewhere there is a copy of it, on something, in a drawer. One day somebody opens the drawer.

SYNOPSIS

Farkhondeh Nikkhah has taught Persian literature in the same district of Tehran for thirty-one years. She has a husband who services other people's gas boilers, a mother who telephones on Fridays, and a son of twenty who has grown up at a table where the government was discussed every night of his life.

There is a second boy in the house and always has been. He arrived in the alley in the summer the two of them were six and eight, and he has eaten at that table ever since. There is no word in the language for what he is to her.

In Dey the shops come down early and the street fills, and she stands in her own hallway and tells her son not to go.

He asks her where she thinks he got it.

At eight o'clock that evening the country's internet and its telephones are switched off together, and then the shooting starts, and there is no way for anything that happens to be filmed and sent anywhere. On the third day the second boy comes up two flights of stairs with something in his coat pocket that he does not want to give her.

She makes him.

What follows is six months in an ordinary flat in Tehranpars. A queue at a bakery. A fortieth day where nobody wears black. A husband driving three hours across the city for two strips of pills. A woman who gets up at five because it takes until eleven to put everything where it belongs.

And an old dream book that belonged to her mother, and a young man who reads it out flat, like a bus timetable, and one night finds that the page she needs has been torn out of it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is set during and after the protests that began in Iran on 7 Dey 1404 [28 December 2025] and the killings of 18 and 19 Dey [8 and 9 January 2026].

Those events are real. The shops of the Tehran bazaar came down over the price of money. The internet and the telephone network were shut off across the country on the evening of the eighteenth, and the shooting began within twenty minutes of the network dying, and it continued into the small hours. Families searched the hospitals and then the forensic centre at Kahrizak, where they were shown photographs of the dead on a screen and asked to say yes or no. Bodies were withheld. Sums were demanded. Where the sums could not be paid, families were offered a form to sign instead, and buried their children at night with a small number of people present and a limit on the time.

How many were killed is not known and may not be known for years. The counts that exist were made by people working through a communications blackout, from outside a country that publishes a much lower figure of its own. Estimates differ by a factor of five. I have not chosen between them and there is no total anywhere in this book. Every number spoken here is spoken by somebody who needs it to be that number, and none of them is confirmed.

I owe the factual ground to the work of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Center for Human Rights in Iran, HRANA, Hengaw, IranWire, the UN fact-finding mission on Iran, and to the journalists of BBC Persian and others who verified footage that people inside the country took enormous risks to send out.

Everything else is invention. There is no real Farkhondeh, no real Roozbeh, no real Yashar, and no family here that corresponds to any family. Nobody in this book is anybody. That matters more than usual, because people are still in prison over these events and some of them have been executed, and it is not my place to put words in

the mouth of anyone who was actually there.

One thing in particular is mine and I want to say so plainly. No parent on the public record has ever said that they let their child go and blame themselves for it. What bereaved Iranian parents have said, over and over, in every account I could find, is the opposite: they are defiant, they want justice, and they refuse the state's version of how their children died. That is the only register available to them and it is a brave one. The woman in this book says something else, in a room where nobody can hear her, and I invented her in order to have somewhere to put it.

The dream manual is real as a kind of book. This one is not.

Chew Z

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I. TO DREAM OF A STRANGER AT THE DOOR

1.

TO DREAM OF A HOUSE YOU HAVE LIVED IN. The house is the body. If a room is missing, look to the part of yourself you have stopped using.

The light comes through the kitchen curtain at four in the afternoon and lies across the table in a long bar, and I have been watching it move for some time now, and it is going the wrong way.

I know this the way you know a wrong note. Not by working it out. It arrives already finished.

I get up and put the kettle on because that is what my hands do at this hour, and while the water is coming to the boil I go and stand in the doorway of his room and put the window back. It is a small job. The window is on the wall by the wardrobe, where it has been since we moved here in the year he was born, and sometimes it is on the other wall, over the desk, and I have to move it. It takes a moment. Nobody sees me do it.

Then I go back and make the tea, and I put out two glasses, and one of them I put back in the cupboard.

Sirous says I should sleep. He says it in the voice he uses for the boiler when it is not his fault. He is fifty-seven and he has spent thirty years with his arm inside other people's walls, and he has a way of standing in a doorway with his hands hanging that means he has come to say something and will not say it.

Sleep, he says.

I am sleeping, I tell him. I am sleeping a great deal.

2.

TO DREAM OF BREAD. Bread is provision. A loaf that will not tear is a debt. To be given bread by a stranger is a warning about the giver.

The queue at the bakery is forty minutes now and there is a man near the front who has decided that the woman behind him is standing too close, and they have been discussing it since I arrived. Nobody joins in. That is the new thing. A year ago there would have

been six opinions and a peacemaker and somebody's cousin. Now everybody looks at the ground and lets it burn out on its own, because the arguing takes a kind of money we have all run out of.

The price has gone up again since Thursday. It goes up on Thursdays. I have started to think of Thursday as a person.

Two girls come past on the pavement with their hair down and their coats open, walking fast, talking, not looking at anybody. One of them has a scarf but it is around her wrist, wound twice, the way you carry a thing you have no use for and have not decided to throw away.

I watch them all the way to the corner.

When I was their age a man took hold of my sleeve on Enghelab Street and told me what I was. I was nineteen. I went home and washed my face and did not tell my mother, and for thirty-one years I have taught other people's daughters to read poems about freedom in a room where I could not have said the word out loud.

And now they walk past a bakery queue with their hair down and it is Tuesday.

They did that. Nobody gave it to them.

I want to say something to them. I want to say — I don't know. *Well done*. Something stupid. Something an old woman says.

They are gone before I decide.

3.

TO DREAM OF TWO CHILDREN. Two children of the same size are one child seen twice. Count them again on waking.

He was six and the other one was eight, and it was the alley, and it was a plastic ball.

That is the whole beginning. There is no more to it than that. People want a beginning to have some weight in it and this one has none. Roozbeh went down to the alley with a ball in Tir and came back at dark without it and said a boy took it, and I said which boy, and he said the one from the end, and I said did you ask for it back, and he said no.

He went down again the next day. And the next.

By the end of that week the ball had come back and the boy had come with it, and he stood in my kitchen doorway with his shoes still on, and he was tall for eight and his ears stuck out and he said, in Persian with the vowels a little long, *Salām, khāleh*.

Salām [sa-LAAM] is hello. *Khāleh* [khaa-LEH] means aunt. It is what a child calls a woman who is not his aunt. It is a courtesy. It costs nothing.

He said it for years.

Later — much later, I could not tell you when, there was no day — he stopped saying it and started saying *Māmān*, and I never once remarked on it, because to remark on it would have been to decide something, and I did not want to decide anything. I wanted him to keep coming.

4.

TO DREAM OF A HOUSE THAT IS NOT YOURS. A house you have eaten in is a house you owe. Look at the door you came in by.

Yashar's grandmother lived four streets over with rugs on the walls that had come from her own dowry and a television that was never once, in fourteen years, turned off.

I went there perhaps twenty times. Never for long. There is a thing that happens in a house where the language changes when you come in, and it is not unfriendliness, it is the opposite — it is people doing you a courtesy at a cost, and everybody in the room working slightly harder for the whole time you are there.

The old woman had about sixty words of Persian and used forty of them on me, and she fed me from a dish she would not put down. They spoke Turkish at home. Turkish in the kitchen, Turkish on the telephone, Persian at the door and at the bank and at the school. Yashar could go from one to the other in the middle of a sentence without his face doing anything, which is a skill I have never had in any language.

At school they gave him a hard time for the vowels. Not badly. Boys' amount. He took it the way you take weather, and he had a way of repeating a word back with the vowels twice as long, deadpan, that made even the boy who had started it laugh.

My son learned about forty words of Turkish, all of them either food or abuse, and used them wrongly for years on purpose.

And their football was not our football. In this house we are *Esteghlal* [es-tegh-LAAL] because Sirous is Esteghlal and that is not a decision anybody gets to make. Over there it was Tabriz — red and white, eight hours north, a whole family shouting at a screen about a referee in a stadium none of them had been in for a decade.

So the two of them never had the argument that every other pair of boys in this city has. They had nothing at all to fight about. They had to invent it, and they did, and one winter they conducted a feud lasting four months over whether the sandwich shop on Farjam had changed its bread.

It had. I checked. I never told either of them.

5.

TO DREAM OF A STRANGER AT THE DOOR. He is news. If he does not speak, the news is already in the house.

The doorbell goes at ten past three and I am not expecting anyone.

There is a young man in the stairwell with his hands in his coat and he does not come in when I open it, he stays on the landing, one step down, which is a thing tall men do so as not to loom, and I have known him since he was eight years old and I cannot for a moment remember his name.

That happens now. It comes back a second later. It is not important. He says *Māmān*, and then he says nothing else for a while, and I stand there with the door open and the cold coming up the stairs, and behind me in the flat the kettle starts to make the noise it makes before it makes the other noise.

I say, come in, the tea is on.

He says, no. He says it very quickly, as though I had offered him something else.

6.

TO DREAM OF A SCHOOL. The bell is not the bell. If you cannot find the room, you have been sent to fetch something and forgotten what.

They were never in the same school year and it never mattered. Two years is a canyon at that age and they walked over it as if it were a crack in the pavement.

At the morning assembly they lined up in the yard in the cold. Somebody read something. Somebody always read something.

At the far end of the yard, out of the light, the two of them would be conducting some transaction — a cable, a disc, a phone passed low and fast — and I know this because I have stood in a yard like it for thirty-one years, and I watched my son learn to do a thing with his shoulders that meant *nothing is happening here*.

He learned it very young. They all did.

7.

TO DREAM OF A CLASSROOM OF GIRLS. Count them. If the number is right, the dream is not about them.

In the autumn of the year my son was sixteen, the girls stopped covering.

Not all of them and not on the same day. It went through a school the way a rumour goes — one at the back on a Tuesday, four on the Wednesday, and by the following week you were standing in front of a room where perhaps a third of them had their hair down and the rest were watching to see what you would do.

I did nothing. I want to be exact about that, because I have thought about it since more than is useful. I did not say anything encouraging and I did not say anything discouraging. I took the register and I taught the lesson.

What I did was I did not look up when I said their names.

That was the whole of my contribution, in a career of thirty-one years. I kept my eyes on the register so that no girl in that room ever had to see me see her.

I was forty-nine. I had a son of sixteen and a mortgage and a job in a state school and a photograph on the wall behind my head, and I did the sum, and the sum came out the way it comes out for almost everybody, almost always.

There were seventeen-year-old girls in that building doing arithmetic with much worse numbers than mine and getting a different answer.

In Mehr they took one of them out of a school in Ardabil. She was sixteen and Azeri, and it went round the Turkish-speaking families in this neighbourhood in a way it did not go round the rest of us — I heard about it at the greengrocer's from a woman I barely knew, in that voice people use for a thing that has happened to their own.

Yashar's mother did not send him to school for three days.

My son came home that week and did not say anything about any of it, and went into his room, and shut the door properly, which he could do because his door shut.

8.

TO DREAM OF A TELEPHONE. A telephone that does not ring is an argument you have not had. If it rings and you do not answer, you already know.

The phone came in the plague year, when they shut the schools and put the lessons on an application that never worked, and every mother in the building discovered at the same moment that her child now required a device that cost four months of a teacher's salary.

He was fourteen. He had wanted one since he was ten and had made the case with great and boring patience, and then the government handed it to him in the shape of a homework problem, and he had the decency not to look pleased.

After that the phone was simply where he lived. I do not say that as a complaint. It is only true.

And every year or so they would take something away from it.

They took the messaging one before he even had a phone, and he was outraged for a week in the way of a boy who has heard adults be outraged. They took the pictures one when he was sixteen and that was worse, because by then it was where everybody was. Each time, within a day, the filter-breaker — *filtershekan* [feel-ter-she-KAN], the thing you install to climb over the wall — would be updated in the building group and my son would come and do my phone for me without being asked, sitting on the arm of the chair, not talking, thumbs going.

Before any of that — he was twelve — a game he had played for two years locked him out. Not our government. The other one. Some rule in some country about who is allowed to buy things. Two years of a small boy's evenings, a village he had built up out of nothing, and one morning the door was shut and there was no door.

He cried about it. He was twelve and he cried, and I sat on the end of his bed and I could not think of one useful sentence, because what do you say. They are all against us? I did not want him to have that in his mouth at twelve. I said: build another one.

He looked at me like I was very stupid and very old, and he was right on both counts, and he built another one.

9.

TO DREAM OF A GAME. A game in a dream is a debt being paid in an easier currency. Note who wins. It will not be who won.

Down on Farjam there was a place with four screens and a boy behind a counter who kept the hours in a notebook, and for about six years that notebook was the true record of my son's life.

They played the football game. Only the football game, as far as I could tell, for six years, the same football game with a new number after it every autumn.

They would come back up at nine or ten and eat everything in the kitchen standing up with the fridge door open and conduct a post-mortem of extraordinary seriousness about something that had not occurred.

I used to listen to it from the other room. Not the words. The rhythm of it. Two voices going up and cutting across each other and stopping dead together to laugh.

You can hear a friendship from another room. You cannot hear anything else about a person from another room, not really — not what they want or what they are frightened of — but you can hear that.

I heard it for fourteen years and I never once went in.

10.

TO DREAM OF AN EXAMINATION. You have not prepared and it is too late. This dream is about something else and always has been.

There is a year in this country that eats a family. It is called the *konkur* [kon-KOOR], and it comes for every household in turn, and there is no way round it.

Yashar's came first because Yashar is two years older, and his was the first one after the plague — two years of lessons on a screen behind him, a whole year-group whose marks meant nothing — and then a sports hall in Tir with the windows open and no air in it.

He did well. Not brilliantly. Well enough for a decent place in the city, which is the outcome that satisfies nobody and disappoints nobody either, and I remember his mother's face when she told me and I remember thinking: she is doing the arithmetic about what he could have had.

Ours came two years later and it took the flat apart.

For a year this house ran on one clock. He got up at five. He came home and ate and went into the room. There were the folders — those enormous folders you buy in the shops on Enghelab, with the practice papers, with the ranking printed on the front to make you frightened — and there was a mock exam every Friday that

produced a number, and that number went on the door of the fridge, and we all pretended it was a joke.

I have taught this exam. I know precisely what it is worth and precisely what it measures and I could give you a lecture on it.

I put his number on the fridge with a magnet like everybody else.

In the last month he stopped sleeping and I found him at three in the morning at the kitchen table with the lamp on and I did the thing that mothers do, which is to say something useless in a soft voice, and he said — not unkindly, he was too tired to be unkind —

Māmān, please just let me finish.

He got what he wanted. He got it by about forty places. Yashar came round that night and the two of them went out and did not come back until two, and I never asked, and there was a great deal of noise on the stairs.

11.

TO DREAM OF WATER. Still water is a woman's own mind. Water that will not come is a thing being kept from you by somebody who believes it is a kindness.

The water goes off at ten at night now. They came on the television and said it was not rationing, it was a reduction in pressure, and Sirous laughed out loud with his mouth full, which he has not done since.

So there is a tank on the balcony and there are four bottles under the sink and there is a bucket, and at half past nine every night I fill things, and I have got the whole operation down to about six minutes.

My mother is seventy-eight and has been through all of this before, more than once, and she has a way of taking a crisis and putting it in a drawer with the others. She telephones on Fridays. She telephones on Fridays even now.

She says: are you eating.

I say: yes.

She says: what did you eat.

And I tell her something, and she lets it go, and then she tells me about the neighbour's daughter, and somewhere in the middle of it she says a thing that stops me.

She has a book. She has had it since before I was born, a cheap thing, the paper gone the colour of weak tea, a line or two to an entry. What it means to dream of water, of a knife, of a stranger, of your own teeth in your hand. Her mother had it. Nobody knows where it came from. When I was a girl and had a bad night she would look it up over breakfast and read it out flat, like a bus timetable, and I would go to school with the reading in my head and it would be gone by lunch.

She says now, on the telephone, on a Friday: your grandmother used to say the same dream can be said two ways.

I say, what does that mean.

She says: *all your relatives will die before you*. And: *you will outlive all your relatives*. Same dream, she says. Different sentence.

And then she asks whether I have been to see about my blood pressure, and the moment closes over like water.

12.

TO DREAM OF A ROAD OUT OF THE CITY. Everybody on the road is dreaming the same thing. That does not make it a road.

The summer before, they told us to leave.

Not our government. The other one, in a message, in the afternoon, saying that the people of this city should go — a city of nine and a half million, in a message, at three o'clock, as though it were a bus.

The road north was solid by the evening. People took what they could and went to the Caspian, to a cousin's, to a half-built place in a village their family came from four generations ago, and the queues at the petrol stations went round the block and then round the next one.

We did not go.

I would like to tell you it was courage. It was Sirous's mother, who is ninety-one and cannot be moved, and it was money, and it was the fact that when we finally discussed it seriously at about midnight we discovered neither of us could think of anywhere to be.

Twelve days. The internet went almost entirely — you could not telephone out, you could not find out what had happened four streets away except by going and looking. Sirous stood on the balcony for a lot of it. There was a night when the whole building went into the corridor.

And in the middle of it, on the fourth or fifth day, the two of them went out.

Not to anything. Out. Two young men, twenty-one and nineteen, went out into a city under bombardment because they had been in the same four rooms for five days, and they came back at midnight with a bag of the cheap ice cream from the place on Resalat that had somehow stayed open, and they sat on the balcony eating it and arguing about a footballer.

I was so angry I could not speak to either of them.

I have thought about that evening perhaps four hundred times.

13.

TO DREAM OF A DOOR THAT WILL NOT CLOSE. You have said a thing and it has gone out of the house. It cannot be called back, and there is no reading for it.

We were not quiet people. That is the thing I keep having to say to somebody and there is nobody to say it to.

This was a house with the dish on the roof and the wrong channels on and my husband shouting at a newsreader with a piece of bread in his hand. This was a table where a man could not get through a plate of rice without explaining what was actually being done to us, in detail, with dates. My father was a schoolteacher too. My mother buys gold when it is quiet and has never in fifty years bought at the wrong moment and thinks the whole apparatus is run by men who could not manage a bakery.

I taught poems for thirty-one years. I taught them to girls in a room with a photograph on the wall, and there is a way of teaching a poem so that a fifteen-year-old understands exactly what it is doing without a single sentence being said that could be written down and taken to anybody.

I was good at it. I was very good at it. So.

On the Thursday the shops came down early and the street had that sound it gets, which is not a loud sound, it is a sound of everybody deciding something at once, and he came out of his room with his coat already on.

I said: not you.

He said: what?

I said: not you. Anybody else. Not you.

And he stood in the hall with one arm in his sleeve and he looked at me — not angry, that is the part I cannot put down — he looked at me the way you look at somebody who has made a small mistake in an argument you are both enjoying, and he said:

Where do you think I got it?

I have had six months to find the answer to that and there isn't one. I have looked. There is nothing there. He was standing in my hallway wearing everything I had put into him and asking me to explain why he shouldn't.

I said: because they will kill you.

He said: they kill everybody, Māmān.

And he did the thing with his shoulders — the yard thing, *nothing is happening here* — and he kissed the side of my head, which he had started doing at about seventeen and which I had never got used to, and he went down the stairs two at a time the way he had gone down them since he was six.

The door did not close properly behind him. It has never closed properly. It swells in winter. Sirous has been going to plane it for six years.

14.

TO DREAM OF A LETTER. It has already been sent. Reading it changes nothing but the hour at which you knew.

Yashar's letter came in Azar, three weeks before.

He is twenty-two. He has the degree. And a young man in this country with a degree and no service has a clock over his head that everybody can see, and there is no passport and no licence and no proper job and no leaving, and the only door out of it costs more than his father earns in three years.

He brought it up here. Not to his mother — up here, on a Friday, and put it on this table.

He said: they've given me until Farvardin.

And I said the things you say. There are five things you say and I said all five. His father would ask around. There was the medical exemption if the knee was as bad as he claimed it was, which it was not. There were men who arranged things.

He listened to all of it with his hands round the glass.

Then he said: I don't mind, Māmān. It's two years.

And Roozbeh, who was in the doorway with his coat half on because he had been going out, said: two years of what, though.

Nobody answered him.

That is where they were, both of them, three weeks before, on a Friday in this kitchen: one of them with a clock running and no way to stop it, and one of them standing in a doorway asking what any of it was for.

I made more tea. I remember doing that. I got up and made more tea because it was the only useful thing in the room.

15.

TO DREAM OF A CROWD. A crowd is one person you are refusing to look at. If you cannot see a face, look for the hands.

I was not there. I want that written down plainly, because everything after this is a thing I was told or a thing I saw on a screen the size of my hand, and I have spent months since then walking up and down inside it as if it were a room I had stood in.

It goes like this.

The picture is on its side and then it is not. Somebody's coat fills the whole of it. There is a sound of running that is very close and very loud, closer than the shouting, because the phone is at the level of a hip.

There is a wall. There is the bottom half of a shutter and a strip of light under it.

The chanting starts a long way off and then it is on top of you, and it is not one thing, it comes in slabs — a line, and then a gap, and then the same line back louder because more of them have found it.

Somebody says a name into the microphone, right into it, a hand's width away, and it is not a name I can hear properly.

The picture swings and there is a road and a bin on its side and beyond that, up the hill, a mass of people who are all facing the same way like grass.

And then somebody must put a hand across the lens, because there is nothing, there is only the sound, and the sound goes on for a long time.

I have watched it four hundred times. I am not exaggerating and I am not being poetic. I have counted, some days, and then stopped.

I do not watch it for information. There is no information in it. I have taken everything out of it that a person could take.

I watch it because it is nine seconds long and for nine seconds he is somewhere in it.

16.

TO DREAM OF SILENCE. Silence in a dream is not the absence of sound. It is a thing that has been put there. Ask who put it.

At eight o'clock the country went out like a light.

Not the electricity. The other thing. The whole of it at once — the phones, the little bars in the corner, the messages, the calls, the machines in the wall that give you money. My phone was in my hand. I was looking at it. It went from being a thing that knew everything to being a piece of glass, and it took about two seconds, and there was no announcement and there has never been one.

The landline was dead too. That is the part that people outside do not understand. They think of it as the internet, as a young person's problem. The landline. The one in the hall with the cord. I picked it up and there was nothing in it, not even the empty sound, and I stood there and pressed the little buttons in the cradle four or five times the way my mother does.

Sirous went out onto the balcony. He came back in and said the woman upstairs had nothing either.

And then we sat.

I want to tell you what that was like and I have not found the way yet. It was not fear, at first. It was more stupid than fear. It was the feeling of putting your foot on a stair that is not there.

They took the light out of the room and then they did it.

That is the order. That is the whole of it, and every single person in this country knows the order, and there is not one photograph, because there was no way for a photograph to go anywhere, because they had thought of that first.

Somewhere out there my son was in a street with a wall behind him.

At some point in the night — I do not know the hour, the clock in the kitchen is not to be trusted — a message came through onto the dead phone. One message. It got in when nothing else could, which tells you who sent it. It said that citizens should report suspicious individuals.

17.

TO DREAM OF A STRANGER AT THE DOOR. He is news. If he will not come in, the news is worse than the house can hold. Do not make him come in.

The doorbell goes at ten past three and I am not expecting anyone.

He stays on the landing, one step down. His coat is wrong for the weather. There is a mark on the cuff that I look at instead of his face, and I will be able to describe that mark for the rest of my life.

He says *Māmān*. Then he says: I have to tell you something.

And I already know. Of course I already know. I have known since eight o'clock on Thursday, in the way that you know a thing and go on setting the table anyway.

But knowing is not the same, and I want you to understand what I did next, because I have thought about it every night since and I would do it again, and that is the worst sentence I have ever had to write down.

He has his hand in his coat pocket and it has not come out.

I say: what's in your pocket.

And his face — he is twenty-two years old and he has been coming into this kitchen since he was eight, and I have fed him ten thousand times, and I watch him decide to lie to me and fail.

He says: nothing. He says: nothing, *Māmān*, I just came to —

I say: give it to me.

He says no.

I say it again. I do not shout. I have never shouted at that boy in his life and I do not shout now. I stand in my own doorway with my hand out and I say give it to me, and I keep saying it, in the voice I have used on four hundred children who did not want to hand something over, and he is not a child, he is a man who has been awake for two days, and I use it on him anyway. He is crying. He is trying to do it without his face moving.

He says: *Māmān*, please. Please don't.

And I say: he was mine.

II. THE UPKEEP

18.

TO DREAM OF A LOCKED BUILDING. The keeper is not the difficulty. The difficulty is that the keeper is correct.

It took eleven days to get him back and I am going to put down what I know, which is not all of it.

I went to Kahrizak on the fourth day and the sixth and the ninth. Everybody went to Kahrizak. There is a road out there past the industrial units and by the second week there was a kind of queue culture on it, women with plastic folders, men with their hands behind their backs, an ecosystem of people telling each other things that were not true.

Inside it is a counter and a screen. They show you photographs. That is how it was done — you sit down and a young man who has been doing this for eleven days turns a screen round and you look, and you say no, and he presses the button, and you look again.

I did four hundred of them. I do not know if it was four hundred. It felt like a working day.

The eleventh day I was out there again and Sirous was not with me, he had gone to the other place, the office, the one where the paperwork happens, and while I was sitting in front of a screen in one building my husband was in another building signing something.

I did not find out for five weeks. Somebody's brother-in-law mentioned it in front of me at a gathering and then went white.

There was a figure. It was not a figure we had. And there was the other way, which is the way they offer you when you say you do not have it, and the other way is a form.

I know what the form says. Everybody in this country knows what the form says. It says he was not what he was.

Sirous signed it at about four in the afternoon on a Sunday in Dey and we buried our son at ten o'clock that night with nine people present, because that was the other condition, and they gave us thirty minutes. And here is the thing I have to put down or none of the rest of this is honest:

I have never asked him about it, and I am not going to, and it is not because I have forgiven him.

It is because I do not know what I would have done, and I will never have to find out, because he went to the other building.

19.

TO DREAM OF A ROOM THAT IS FULL OF PEOPLE. Count the chairs, not the guests. If there is one chair too many the house is not yet finished with its business.

The third day the flat holds forty people and I do not remember letting any of them in.

There is a system. Somebody has brought the extra glasses from the mosque in a crate. Somebody is doing the washing up who has never been in my kitchen. The men are on the balcony because there is nowhere else and it is cold and they stay out there anyway, smoking, in coats, not talking much.

Dates and halva. Trays of them, coming in the door as fast as they go out. There is a shop on Farjam that has sold nothing but dates, halva and candles since Dey and is the only business on that street doing well, and everyone knows it, and nobody says it.

A woman I do not know takes both my hands and tells me he is with God.

I say thank you.

A man from the ministry office where Sirous does his paperwork tells me that in a year I will find that the pain has changed shape. He is kind. He has clearly said it before.

I say thank you.

And a young man comes in at about six, in the wrong coat, and stands against the wall by the shoe rack for two hours, and does not eat anything, and does not speak to anybody, and when the woman with the crate asks him to help carry something he does it and comes straight back to the wall.

Somebody's aunt asks him, on her way past, in the ordinary way, without meaning anything by it:

Nesbat-etun chi-ye? [nes-BAT-e-toon CHEE-yeh] — *what is your relation?*

And he opens his mouth and nothing comes out of it.

I am across the room. I could have said it for him. It would have taken me one second and I did not do it, and I have gone back into that room a hundred times since to do it and I never get there in time.

20.

TO DREAM OF THE SEVENTH DAY. By now the guests are performing. Watch the one who is not.

The seventh day is smaller and worse.

The third day you are carried. There are forty people and a system and somebody has brought the glasses from the mosque and you are not required to be a person, you are required to be a chair that people say things to.

By the seventh the crate has gone back. There are ten people, and most of them are family, and everybody has already said their sentence and now has to find a second one.

That is when it starts. Not at the burial — at the seventh, in the afternoon, when a cousin says something ordinary about the traffic and you understand that the traffic is going to go on.

Yashar's mother came on the seventh day.

She had not come on the third. I understood that and I have never held it against her for one second, and I want it written down that I have never held it against her, in case anybody ever reads this and gets it wrong.

She came in and she stood in the middle of my front room and she said my name and then she could not do the rest of it. Her son came home. That is the whole of it and there is nothing to be done about it and neither of us has ever said it out loud. Two boys went down those stairs on the eighteenth of Dey. One of them came back up.

She is a good woman. She fed my child. On four hundred occasions across fourteen years she fed my child, and I fed hers, and we have run a kind of joint household on two floors of two buildings for all of it, without either of us ever calling it anything.

She stood in my front room and she could not say a sentence.

And I could not go to her. I want that put down too. I stood a metre away from a woman I have known for fourteen years and I could not make my legs do it, and she saw that I could not, and she left after nine minutes.

She has not been back. She sends things with him.

21.

TO DREAM OF FOOD YOU CANNOT EAT. A full plate is an obligation. To refuse it is permitted once.

Mrs Ansari on the fourth floor lost nobody.

She has said so herself, twice, in a tone that suggests she considers it an oversight. Her husband is alive, her sons are in Karaj and Ankara respectively and both of them telephone, and she has come down these stairs every single day since the seventh day with something on a plate under a cloth.

Rice. Soup. Once a thing with aubergine that took her a whole morning.

I do not eat it. She knows I do not eat it. On day nine I said, Mrs Ansari, please, and she said, you don't have to eat it, and went back up.

So now it is a delivery. She comes down at half past one, she puts it on the counter, she takes yesterday's plate, she goes. Some days she says something about the water. Some days nothing at all. Sirous eats it. Standing up, at the counter, in the afternoon, with the fridge door open, which is a thing his son used to do and which he has started doing since, and I do not think he knows.

A hundred and eighty days of this now. I have not thanked her properly and I am not going to, because the moment I do it becomes a thing that finishes, and I would rather owe her.

Nān o namak [NAAN o na-MAK] — bread and salt. You eat at a house, you are held by it. That is how it goes in this language, in that direction, from the one who eats to the one who feeds.

There is no phrase running the other way.

22.

TO DREAM OF A STAIRCASE. Going up is ambition and going down is memory. A stair that is heard and not seen is neither.

The first time was a Tuesday, about the thirteenth day.

I was in the kitchen and the outer door of the building went two floors down, the way it does, with the bang and then the smaller bang, and then somebody came up the stairs.

Two at a time. Landing, turn, two at a time.

And I stood up.

I want to be careful here. I did not think he was alive. I have never once thought that. I knew on the Thursday and I have known every minute since and there has not been a single second of confusion about it.

I stood up because a body is stupid. It hears a rhythm it has heard ten thousand times and it stands up.

It was the boy from the second floor with his bicycle wheel.

I sat back down and I finished what I was doing.

That is all it is. That is what it is, every time, and it happens now perhaps twice a week — the stairs, or the sound of the tap running in the bathroom when nobody is in the bathroom, or the particular way the light goes across the hall at nine at night that used to mean he had come in and left the door open.

I have told nobody. Not because I am frightened of it. Because I know exactly what it is and I know exactly what anyone I told would do with it.

23.

TO DREAM OF YOUR OWN HANDS. The hands are the work. If they are not your hands, look at what you have been asked to do with them.

My ring came off in the sink on a Thursday in Bahman.

Not fell off. Came off — went round the finger too easily and stopped at the knuckle, and I looked at it for a moment with my hands in the water, and then I dried them and put it in the dish on the shelf and left it there.

The first week was water. Everybody says this and nobody believes it until it happens to them: you lose an armful of something in five days simply by not drinking tea and not being upright much. Then it slows and it becomes the real thing, the slow thing, and after that it is not a week's worth, it is a month's, and it goes on doing it quietly while you are thinking about something else.

The doctor at the clinic on Delavaran weighed me in Esfand and did not say anything about the number. He turned the little dial and wrote it down and asked me about my sleep.

I told him the truth, which is that I sleep a great deal.

I did not tell him what I do in it.

24.

TO DREAM OF A QUEUE. A queue is a promise made by nobody. If you reach the front, you have dreamed past the end of the reading.

Sirous does the pharmacies.

He does not discuss it. He goes out after his last job and he does the four of them in a circuit — the one on Farjam, the one by the bank, the big one on Resalat, and then, if he has to, the one in the arcade where the man knows him.

There are two kinds. The Iranian one is available and it is cheap and it works, mostly, if you get a good batch. The foreign one is a million and a bit for a strip and it is in the arcade, and the man in the arcade does not ask questions and Sirous does not like him.

He came back one night in Esfand with three strips in a bag and put them on the table and said, they're the Iranian ones, and then sat down with his coat still on.

He is fifty-seven. He has never in his life not been able to fix a thing in a building.

I said: it's fine.

He said: it isn't.

And that is the entire conversation we have had about any of it, in six months, from the start to now.

25.

TO DREAM OF A SHUT SHOP. The shutter is not against you. Go home and come back tomorrow and it will still not be against you.

There was a night in Ordibehesht when Sirous did all four and came back with nothing.

Not the Iranian one, not the foreign one, not a substitute. The man in the arcade had none and was not expecting any, and the big one on Resalat had a sign up, and the one on Farjam had shut early because of the power.

He stood in the kitchen with his coat on and the empty bag still in his hand and he said: tomorrow.

I said: it's fine, I've got four days.

I had two days. I had counted them that morning, sitting on the edge of the bath, twice, because the first count had come out at three.

He said: I'll go to Tajrish.

Tajrish is an hour and a half each way and he had been on a job in Karaj since six.

I said: Sirous.

And he said — and this is the only time in six months that my husband has raised his voice in this flat —

What else am I supposed to do?

Then he put the bag on the counter and went out onto the balcony and stayed there for a long time, and I sat at the table and did not follow him, because there was nothing out there for me to say and we both knew it.

He went to Tajrish the next morning before his first job and got two strips of the Iranian one from a place a friend of his brother's knows.

It is not a story about medicine. It is a story about a man of fifty-seven driving three hours in one day to be able to put something on a counter, because it was the only thing left in the world that he was still able to do for me.

26.

TO DREAM OF A YOUNG MAN WHO DOES NOT SPEAK. He is carrying something. He will not put it down in front of you. Do not ask him twice.

Yashar comes on Fridays.

He came the first Friday and I assumed it was the seventh-day business and that would be that. He came the Friday after. He has come every Friday since and it is now Tir.

He does not stay long. He sits in the chair by the window — not the sofa, he has never once sat on the sofa — and he drinks one tea and he answers whatever I ask him, and what I ask him is: how is your mother, is there any news about the service, is the car fixed.

He says: fine, fine, yes.

We have never discussed the thing. Not once. He has never said the word and I have never asked him what he saw with his own eyes as opposed to what the phone saw, and I never will, because there is a version of that answer that I cannot have in this flat.

There is a thing he does that I have not mentioned to him. When he arrives he stops in the hall for a second by the shoe rack, and he looks at the floor there, and then he comes through.

That is where he stood on the third day for two hours.

He is twenty-two. He has eaten at my table since he was eight years old and he has no name for what he is to me and neither do I, and every Friday for six months he has come up two flights of stairs to sit in a chair for forty minutes with a woman who cannot look at him properly.

I make the tea too strong for him. He has never once said.

27.

TO DREAM OF A CLOCK. A clock in a dream tells the hour of the dream, not the hour. Do not set your affairs by it.

There are three things now.

The window in his room, which I have written down already, and which is a small job.

The kitchen clock, which is not to be trusted and which I have stopped looking at, and which I could take down but do not.

And a smell. In the afternoons, in the hall, between about two and four — cooking, from below, onions and something, a good smell, an ordinary smell of a family with an appetite.

There is nobody below. The flat under this one has been empty since the summer of the war, when the Rahimis went north and did not come back, and the agency has a sign in the window that has faded to nothing.

I know that. I have known it for over a year. I go out onto the landing and I stand there and I can smell somebody's lunch.

It has got harder. That is all I will say about it. In the first weeks there was one thing and now there are three, and it takes longer in the mornings than it used to, and by about eleven I have usually got it all where it belongs and can sit down.

28.

TO DREAM OF WHITE. White is not mourning. If the mourners are in white, they have decided something. Note whether you are among them.

The fortieth day — the *chehelom* [che-he-LOM] — was the twenty-seventh of Bahman, and it was not a funeral.

I want to put that down accurately because the newspapers outside have said what they have said, and the television inside has said the other thing, and neither of them was standing where I was standing. There were four hundred people at that cemetery and perhaps a hundred of them were ours. The rest were somebody else's. There were sixteen fortieths going on within a hundred metres of each other and they had all arrived at the same hour because the day is the day and it does not move for anybody.

Nobody wore black.

I did not know that was going to happen. I want that understood — nobody organised it, there was no arrangement, there could not have been an arrangement because the network was still broken and half the city could not telephone the other half. Four hundred people simply arrived, on the same morning, in white and in colours, and stood among the stones looking at each other.

A woman about my age near the wall started singing. It was not a religious thing. It was an old song, a very old one, the sort my mother knows all the verses of, and it took perhaps thirty seconds for the second voice to come in.

There were men on the road in with a vehicle. There were men on the ridge. Nobody did anything, that day, in that place. They stood and they watched and they let it happen and they wrote down what they needed to write down.

A boy released two doves near the top of the hill and everybody looked up.

I was there for four hours and I did not cry.

29.

TO DREAM OF MEDICINE. What is given to you to swallow may be a cure or a silence. The reading does not distinguish and neither will you.

My sister came from Karaj for the fortieth and stayed three nights, and on the last night she sat on the end of my bed and said, in a small voice, that she was frightened.

I said, of what.

She said: you didn't cry. I said, I know.

She said: Farkhondeh, you didn't cry at the *chehelom*.

And I could not explain it to her, and I am not sure I can explain it now, but I will try, because it is the truest thing I have to say about that spring.

I was not less sad. I want to be exact. There was not one gram less of it. It was all there, the whole weight, standing in the room where it has stood since Dey.

I simply could not get to it.

It was on the other side of something. I could describe what had happened to my son in a level voice to a stranger at a bus stop. I could say the sentence *my son was killed in Dey* the way you say *the bank closes at two*. And underneath, unreachable, at a distance of about a metre, was a woman screaming, and I could not get to her, and I could hear her perfectly well.

My sister thought the flatness was the illness.

The flatness was the treatment.

30.

TO DREAM OF A SCHOOL. The bell is not the bell. If you cannot find the room, you have been sent to fetch something and forgotten what.

They opened the schools again on the third of Esfand and I went back on the fifth, because staying at home had become a job I was doing badly.

Nobody knew what to say to me. That is not a complaint, it is a description. The head of department came out of her office and held both my arms and said my name twice and let go. A young teacher who has been there two years crossed the yard to avoid me and I do not blame him at all.

At the gate there were men going through the students' bags. That was new. They took four phones off the upper school in the first week and gave two of them back. I have thirty of them in the room at nine o'clock on a Sunday. Sixteen and seventeen. His age, near enough — his age three years ago, which is a thing my head does now without being asked.

The girls do not cover in my classroom and have not for three years and I have never once mentioned it, and neither has anybody else, and there is no rule about it any more and there is no rule against it either, and everybody has agreed to live in the gap.

One of them, a small one at the back who never speaks, waited behind on the second day. She stood by the desk while the others went out and she did not look at me and she said: my brother knew him.

And then she went.

I taught for seven more minutes that day before I had to stop and stand in the corridor.

31.

TO DREAM OF A TELEPHONE. A telephone that does not ring is an argument you have not had. If it rings and you do not answer, you already know.

My mother telephones on Fridays.

She is seventy-eight. She has buried a husband, a brother she does not discuss, and now a grandson, and she telephones on Fridays and asks whether I am eating and then tells me about the neighbour's daughter.

In Esfand she said: are you dreaming?

Not *are you sleeping*. She has never once asked whether I am sleeping.

I said yes.

She said: what of.

And I told her a little of it — the stairs, the smell in the hall, the room. Not all of it. Enough that she would stop asking. She was quiet for a moment and then she said: I'll send you my book.

I said no.

She said: I'll send it with somebody.

I said I don't want it, Māmān, I'm fifty-two years old.

And she said the thing she says, which is that her mother had it and her mother's mother had it and it costs nothing to look, and then she went back to the neighbour's daughter, who is getting married, apparently, to somebody's cousin from Shiraz.

32.

TO DREAM OF A BOOK. A book you have not opened is a question you already know the answer to. A book with a page missing has been read by somebody else first.

It came on a Friday in Farvardin, with Yashar, because of course it did — my mother has never in her life posted anything she could send with a person.

He brought it up in a plastic bag from a fruit shop and put it on the table without a word, and then he sat in the chair by the window and drank the tea that is too strong for him.

It is not much of a book. It is smaller than I remembered and the cover has gone, and there is a water mark across the bottom third of every page from some flood in some other decade, and the paper has that softness that old cheap paper gets, like cloth.

A line or two to an entry. To dream of water. To dream of a knife. To dream of your teeth coming out into your hand.

I did not open it for a week.

Then, on a Friday, with him sitting there in the chair, I said: what does it mean to dream of a staircase.

And he did not ask me why. That is the thing about him. He did not say *are you all right*, he did not say *Māmān*, he did not do any of the things that a person does. He picked up the book and found the place with his thumb and turned it round on the table and read it out.

Flat. Like a bus timetable.

And I said: read it again.

III. THE MISSING PAGE

33.

TO DREAM OF HAIR. Hair is what the body can spare. If it is in your hand, something has been decided without you.

It started in Esfand, which is two months late, and that is the part nobody warns you about.

In the first weeks everything is on fire and everybody is in the flat and there is a woman on the fourth floor with a plate. Then the plates stop, all but one, and the telephone stops, and people go back to their own trouble, which is correct and which I do not hold against a single one of them.

And then, when the house is finally quiet, the body puts in its report.

It is on the pillow first. Not a clump — I want to be accurate about this, because I had imagined it wrong. It is not a handful. It is fifteen or twenty on the pillowcase in the morning, and then it is the drain, and then it is the comb, and then one day you are standing in a bad light in the bathroom and the parting is wider than it was.

That is all it is. It thins. It does not come out in patches and you do not go bald. You simply become a woman whose hair has less in it, and there is no morning when it happens.

I put my hand up to it about nine times a day now. I have caught myself doing it in the classroom.

Two months late. The thing arrives in Dey and the body files it in Esfand, after the visitors have gone, when there is nobody left in the flat to see it.

34.

TO DREAM OF A WAR. A war in a dream is not the war. It is a thing you are permitted to be frightened of instead.

The second one started on the ninth.

Sirous had it on in the other room with the sound low, the way he has had it on for a year and a half, and he came and stood in the

kitchen doorway with his hands hanging and said the word, and I said yes.

That is what I said. Yes.

Then I went on doing what I was doing, which was rinsing something.

I am putting this down because it is true and because it frightens me more than most of what is in this book. There was a war. It went on for weeks. The Rahimis' flat downstairs was already empty and half the building went the same way and Mrs Ansari's sons both telephoned.

And I have almost nothing to tell you about it.

I know it happened the way I know about a flood in a province I have never visited. Somewhere in there the school shut again. Somewhere in there we slept in the corridor twice.

I could not get to it. It was on the other side of the same thing everything else is on the other side of, and there is a version of me who would have been on the balcony every night with her arms crossed, furious, well-informed, and that woman was not available in Esfand.

A country was being bombed and I was in a flat in Tehranpars putting a window back.

35.

TO DREAM OF A ROOM YOU CANNOT LEAVE. The door is not locked. Look at what you are holding.

There were three things. I wrote that down.

I am not going to write the number again.

It is not that there are so many. It is that they have stopped being separate — they have joined up along the edges, so that fixing the window has come to involve the hall, and the hall has come to involve the hour, and the hour will not stay where it is put unless the kitchen is right first.

I get up at five now. Not from a decision. It simply takes until about eleven and if I start at seven I do not finish and the whole day is a day where I did not finish.

Sirous asked me in Farvardin what I do in the mornings.

I said: I tidy.

He looked at the flat, which has not been tidied since Dey.

36.

TO DREAM OF A VOICE. A voice without a body is a question of yours coming back to you. Answer it and see who agrees.

He comes at about two.

Not every night. Four nights, then nothing for a week, then three in a row. There is no pattern and I have looked for one.

He sits on the end of the bed on the side by the window, which is the side he sat on when he was small and had a temperature, and he has his coat on, and he smells of the outside the way a boy does when he has come in from cold and has not taken anything off yet.

We talk about nothing much. That is the strange part. He asks about his grandmother. He complains about a thing that happened at the university, and it is a thing I know about, because he told me about it in the autumn. Everything he says, I have heard before.

He is funny in the way I am funny, which is not the way he was funny.

And every time, at some point, I ask him.

I say: what happened on the corner.

And he does not answer. He has never once answered. He does the thing with his shoulders and he looks at the wardrobe and he says something about the traffic, or he says *Māmān*, in that tone, the one that means you are being ridiculous and we both know it.

I have asked him thirty times. Forty. I have asked him nicely and I have asked him at four in the morning in a voice I did not know I had, and he sits there in his coat and he will not tell me, and I do

not understand how he can sit on my bed and not tell me, when he knows, when he is the only person in the world who knows.

Last week I said: you were there.

And he said: so were you.

37.

TO DREAM OF A FRIDAY. The week has a hinge. Whatever is done on that day is done to the whole week.

He still comes.

The chair by the window, one tea, forty minutes. Since Dey. Through a war.

The tea is still too strong and he still drinks it, and this spring I started noticing that he leaves about a third, always about a third, always the same amount, which means he worked out years ago that if he empties it I will fill it again.

Fourteen years and I never once knew that about him.

He looks bad. I am allowed to say that. He is twenty-two and he has the face of a man who has been holding something up with his arms for six months. He has stopped shaving properly. There is a mark on the cuff of that coat that he has never had cleaned and I do not think he owns another one.

We do the book at the end. That is how it goes now — the tea, the three questions about his mother and the service and the car, and then, when he stands up, I say the thing I have been holding all week, and he sits back down and finds the place with his thumb.

A voice without a body.

A room you cannot leave.

He reads it flat and he does not look up while he is reading and he does not look up after.

Once, in Ordibehesht, he read one out and I said: it doesn't say that.

And he said: it does.

And he turned the book round on the table so I could see, and he was right, it did, and I felt so ashamed I could not speak for a minute.

He put his hand flat on the table for a second, not on mine, next to it. Then he took the glass to the kitchen the way he has since he was nine.

38.

TO DREAM OF A DOCTOR. He will ask you three questions. The third is the one he came for.

The clinic on Delavaran, in Ordibehesht, and this time it was not about my sleep.

There is a form. Of course there is a form. It is a good form, as these things go, and the woman at the desk was decent and did not hurry me, and there is a box on it near the top.

Sirous filled it in because my hands are not reliable in the mornings and I had said the words out loud in the car.

He got to that box and he stopped. I watched him stop. He had the pen on the paper and he sat there for — I do not know. Long enough that the woman looked up and then looked down again, which was kind of her.

Because what do you put.

Bereavement is a word for a thing that arrives in the ordinary way. What we have is not that. And the true answer is one sentence and every person in that room knew what it was and there is no version of it that can go in a box on a form that gets typed into a system and kept.

He wrote something. I did not look and I have never asked.

Afterwards, in the car, he said: it's just a form.

I said: I know.

39.

TO DREAM OF SOMETHING YOU HAVE LOST. You will find it in the last place because you will stop looking. The reading for the thing itself is elsewhere in this book.

There is one I have every night.

Not four nights and then a week. Every night, since Dey, without one exception, and it is not him, and it is not the street, and it is not the nine seconds.

It is the door.

Our door, this door, the one at the top of these stairs that swells in the winter and has never shut properly and that Sirous has been going to plane for six years. In the dream I push it and it comes back. I push it again and it comes back. There is nothing frightening in it. There is no sound and nobody in the stairwell and no one is coming. It is a woman pushing a door in a hall, all night, and that is the whole of it.

In Khordad I finally asked him.

I said: a door that will not close. He picked up the book. He knows the shape of it now, he goes to the right third straight away, and he turned two pages and turned them back.

And then he sat very still.

I said: what.

He turned the book round.

There is a page gone. Not a corner, not a tear across the print. Somebody has taken a whole leaf out low down near the spine, and taken it carefully, and it is old — the paper around the stub has gone the same tea colour as everything else, so it did not happen this year and it did not happen this decade.

My mother's book. Her mother's before that.

I said: which one is it.

He said: I don't know. It's between *dar* and *div*.

Dar [DAR] is a door. *Div* [DEEV] is a demon. The book runs in that order, by the thing you dreamed of, and whatever is gone was somewhere between them.

Somebody in my family, in some other country of a year, wanted a reading badly enough to take it out of the house in her pocket.

Or she did not want anybody else to have it.

40.

TO DREAM OF A DOOR THAT WILL NOT CLOSE. You have said a thing and it has gone out of the house. It cannot be called back, and there is no reading for it.

He came back the next Friday and he had it.

He sat down and he put the book on the table and he opened it to a place near the front, and he said: I found it. It's under the other listing. It's not where you'd look.

And he read it out.

Flat, like a bus timetable. Six seconds. I made him say it twice and then I made him write it on the back of an envelope, and that envelope is in the drawer in the kitchen with the batteries and the plastic measuring cap from something, and I have taken it out perhaps a hundred times.

He is a very bad liar and he was not lying with his face. He was lying with his hands, which is harder to see — he did not turn the book round.

He has turned that book round on that table every single Friday since Farvardin.

I did not say anything. I want that on the record too, along with the other things I did not say. He is twenty-two years old, he had gone home and sat down somewhere and made up a reading for a door that will not close, and he had come up two flights on a Friday to give it to me, and I took it, and I have it in a drawer.

41.

TO DREAM OF A JOURNEY. Note what you are carrying. If you have packed for a season you will be there for a season.

I stopped going in on the twenty-fourth of Khordad.

It was not a scene. I do not want anybody thinking there was a scene, because there was not, and the head of department has been decent throughout and I will not have it said.

I was in the corridor between the second and third period with the register in my hand and I could not remember which room. That is all. It has happened to every teacher who has ever lived. You stand there for four seconds and then you remember.

I stood there and I did not remember, and the bell went, and I was still standing there, and a girl I have taught for two years put her hand on my arm and said *khānum* [KHAA-noom], and walked me to the staff room, and I let her.

Sixteen years old. Somebody's daughter. Walking me down a corridor by the arm. They put me on the leave that is not called leave. Full pay. Come back in Mehr, we'll see.

I came home at eleven in the morning to a flat that takes until eleven, and I had already missed it, and there was nothing to do all day and I did not do it.

42.

TO DREAM OF A DESK. A man behind a desk is not the difficulty. The difficulty is the thing you must say to get past him.

It was a Tuesday in the first week of Tir and I am not going to write down what happened on the Monday.

Not because I do not remember it. I remember all of it, and Sirous does, and Mrs Ansari from the fourth floor does, because she came down.

I will put down this much: nobody was hurt, nothing was broken except a glass, and I was in the stairwell for some time and I was not quiet.

In the morning Sirous made tea and sat down opposite me and said: we're going to see somebody.

I said all right.

I think he had a speech. He had been up all night, I know that, and I think he had a speech, and I said all right straight away and he never got to use it, and he sat there with it in his mouth.

We went in a car. Not ours — a neighbour's, with the neighbour driving, because Sirous's hands were no better than mine that day.

And the man driving said, over his shoulder, in the ordinary way: where are we going?

And my husband, who has never been lost for a word in thirty years of standing in other people's kitchens explaining what is wrong with their boiler —

My husband said: Kargar. South Kargar. I'll show you. He said the street. He gave the man the whole route, junction by junction, all the way across the city, in a level voice, and he did not once say the name of the place.

He could not put it in his mouth. It is my son's name.

43.

TO DREAM OF A CORRIDOR. A corridor is a decision that has already been made. Walking slowly does not alter it.

There is a desk inside the door and a woman behind it with a screen, and she has done this six times before lunch and she is not unkind, she is simply somewhere else, which is the correct place for her to be.

They took me through and Sirous stayed.

I could see him from where they put me to wait. Down the corridor, at the desk, with a form and a biro on a string, and the woman turning it round on the counter and pointing at the bottom of it with a pen.

He signed it standing up. He did not sit down and he did not read it.

Thirty seconds. Perhaps not that.

Nobody explained anything to him. There was no judge in it and no court and no letter — I had imagined, if I had imagined anything, that there would be more apparatus than this. There is not. There is a counter, and a form, and a man in a coat too warm for Tir, signing a thing at ten past nine in the morning with his hand shaking.

And while I was sitting there, Yashar came in.

I do not know who telephoned him. It was not me and I do not believe it was Sirous.

He came in through the doors at the far end and stopped, and looked down the corridor at me sitting on the chairs, and started walking. And the woman behind the desk looked up from the form and asked him — not unkindly, just as the next question, the way you ask for a date of birth:

Nesbat-etun chi-ye?

He had his hand on the back of the chair by then. He had come across the whole city.

And he stood in that corridor with his mouth open and he could not answer her.

IV. FOUR O'CLOCK

44.

I wake at four and the room is right.

That is the first thing and it takes me a moment to understand it. I lie there and I go through it the way I go through it every morning — the window, the hall, the hour — and there is nothing to do. The window is by the wardrobe. It has always been by the wardrobe.

Sirous is asleep on his back with one arm off the side of the bed, which he has done for thirty years and which I have complained about for thirty years.

I get up because I am thirsty and because I want to look at the hall.

The floor is cold. There is that blue in the air that comes before anything, when the street is not yet the street, and somewhere off towards Farjam a van is being loaded, a man saying something to another man, one word twice.

I go down the hall to the door at the top of the stairs, the one that swells, and I pull it to.

It closes.

It goes into the frame the way a door goes into a frame, with the sound doors make, and it stays.

I stand there for a while with my hand on it.

45.

He is in the kitchen with the fridge open, eating something out of a dish standing up, with his coat on over his pyjamas because the heating goes off at two.

He says, without turning round: there's no bread.

I say: there's bread in the freezer.

He says: frozen bread isn't bread, Māmān.

And I sit down at the table in the dark, because the light in the hall is enough, and I watch my son eat cold rice out of a dish at four in the morning with his coat on. He is twenty. He has a mark on his jaw where he has been picking at something. He has got very thin

this year — everybody has, it is not a thing about him — and his wrists come out of the coat sleeves like a boy's.

He tells me about a lecturer. It is a long story and it is not a good story, and he tells it the way he tells things, which is to put the funny part in the middle and then keep going.

I ask if he has spoken to Yashar.

He says: Friday.

I say: is he eating?

He says: nobody's eating, Māmān.

Then the power goes.

It goes the way it goes — the hum stops first, the fridge, and you notice the absence before you notice the dark. Somewhere below us a woman says something short.

He does not even look up. He says: half past four.

I say: they said it'd be the other side of Resalat tonight.

He says: they always say that.

And we sit in the dark in the kitchen, the two of us, not doing anything, waiting for it to come back on, which it does in about twenty minutes and always has.

He says: are you all right?

I say: I had a bad dream.

He says: what about?

And I tell him. Not all of it. The stairs, the door, the smell of cooking in the hall from a flat with nobody in it. The queue at the bakery and the two girls going past with their hair down. Some months of it, in the dark, in about four minutes, the way you can only tell a dream while it is still warm.

He listens. He is good at listening; he always was, it is the thing his father cannot do at all.

And at the end of it he says: that's horrible. And I say: yes.

And then I say — and I do not decide to, it comes out of me the way water comes out of a jug —

I say: tell me what happened on the corner.

46.

He puts the dish down.

He says: it was quick.

He says: I didn't know anything about it, Māmān. There wasn't any of it. I was there and then I wasn't there. I didn't have time to be frightened.

And it is the right answer. It is the exact answer. It is the one I have been going out and looking for at two in the morning for six months, and here it is in my own kitchen, in his voice, in the dark.

It was quick. I didn't know.

And I hear myself write it.

That is the only way I can put it down. I heard the join. I heard where the sentence had come from, and it had not come from the corner of Rashid and it had not come from him. It had come out of me, out of the middle of me, where I have been keeping it and turning it and making it smooth for six months the way you make a stone smooth.

He would not have said *Māmān* there. He would have said something stupid. He would have said something about the traffic.

I said: you don't know that.

And he said, in my voice, with my mouth: no.

And the light did not come back on.

47.

Ceiling.

There is a strip of light along the top of the wall from the corridor, because it is never properly dark in here, and there is a woman two

beds down who breathes badly and has done since Sunday, and a trolley somewhere with one wheel that sings.

Tir. It is Tir. It is still Tir.

I go through it. This is the part I am good at now and I do it fast, like a woman checking a bag for her keys.

He is dead. He was killed on the eighteenth of Dey on the corner of Rashid, on the street, with a wall behind him. He was twenty. I saw it. I made Yashar show me and he did not want to and I made him and I would do it again.

There. All of it. In about four seconds.

And then I lie here and wait for the rest of it to arrive, which it does, in the way that a thing arrives when you have already been told.

I do this most nights.

That is what I want to put down, if I can only put down one thing. Not the dream. The dream is the easy part.

Most nights I get all the way here and then, some time before the trolley, I go back under, and it starts again — the flat, the window, the queue, the whole apparatus, all of it, in order, from the beginning — and I do it again, and near the end of it I wake up in my own bed at four in the morning and the door closes properly and he is in the kitchen with the fridge open.

Six hundred and something times.

Every single night it works. Every single night I am in my kitchen in the dark with my son and everything is ordinary, and I am not even happy, that is the thing, I am not grateful, I am not weeping with relief — I am just a woman at four in the morning who is a bit cold and is going to go back to bed in a minute.

That is what it gives me. Not joy. Tuesday. And then I ask him. I always ask him. I have never once got through it without asking him, not once in six hundred, and he always tells me, and it is always the same answer, and it is always mine.

48.

She says the same eleven things.

I have them all now. She says them in a particular order, mostly, and I know where the order comes from and I have never told her.

Fridays are still Fridays. They let me in at four and out at half past five and I sit in the chair by the window, which in here is a different chair, and she talks and I do not, which is what we have always done.

Her mother's book is on my knee with a bag over it because they do not like paper on the ward.

She says: what does it mean to dream of a door.

And I find the place with my thumb, and I read it out flat, the way her mother used to, and she goes back under while I am still reading. Sometimes she is gone by the second line.

I have started making them up. I want that written down somewhere by somebody, so I am writing it here. Not all of them. Most of them are in the book, and the book is a stupid book, it says a knife is a journey and a fish is money and none of it means anything to anybody.

But some of them I make up, in the flat, on Thursdays, on the back of whatever is on the table.

Because she asks, and because there is a page missing out of the middle, and because the true reading is one sentence long and I am the only person alive who has it.

I had it in my pocket and I did not want to give it to her.

She stood in her own doorway with her hand out. She had fed me since I was eight years old. She said *give it to me* four times, and then she said *he was mine*, and she was right, and I gave it to her, and I watched her watch it. Nine seconds. I have not opened it since. It is still on there.

They ask me at the desk every Friday, because it is a different woman every Friday.

What is your relation?

And I have had six months to think of something and I still stand there like an idiot with my hand on the back of a chair.

There is no word for it. There is a word for what I owe her and there is a word for what those two were to each other, there is even a word for the friend who hides in the cave with you while they are outside looking for you, and there is nothing at all for a woman who fed a boy for fourteen years and is not his mother.

So I write it down instead. All of it, in her voice, because it is the only voice in it. The flat, the queue, the girls with their hair down, the window she keeps putting back. The bits she says on Fridays and the bits I have had to fill in, and I could not tell you now which are which, and neither could she.

It is not for anybody. Nobody is going to read it.

I do it because she cannot, and because it was my phone.

49.

He was eleven, and it was a Thursday, and it was hot.

They came up the stairs so fast that the outer door was still swinging when they got to the top, and they came into the kitchen without knocking because neither of them had knocked since the year before, and they were carrying between them, with enormous care, a bag of ice from the shop on the corner that had cost them four hundred *toman* [to-MAAN] they had got by taking bottles back.

They had a plan. It was a very bad plan and it involved the bath.

I said no.

They negotiated. Yashar did the talking because Yashar always did the talking, standing there being reasonable, and my son stood behind him nodding at everything like a man at a meeting, and the ice was going over the floor while they made their case. I said no again and they went out and did it on the balcony instead with a washing-up bowl, and the water came through onto the Rahimis' awning, and Mrs Rahimi came up, and I stood in my own doorway and apologised to that woman with my face absolutely straight

while behind me in the flat two boys made a noise like a kettle trying not to laugh.

That afternoon. That is the one.

Not a birthday. Not the sea, we went to the sea twice and I could not tell you a thing about either. A Thursday in a hot kitchen with a bag of ice and two boys and the whole of it still ahead.

I have it. Nobody can do anything about it.

I had a good life for a while.

GLOSSARY

Azar [aa-ZAR] — The ninth month, late November to late December.

Bahman [bah-MAN] — The eleventh month, late January to late February.

Chehelom [che-he-LOM] — Persian, the fortieth. The mourning ceremony held on the fortieth day of mourning, counting the day of the death as the first.

Dar, div [DAR, DEEV] — Persian, door and demon. Neighbouring headings in a Persian dream manual, which is ordered by the thing dreamed of.

Dey [DAY] — The tenth month, late December to late January.

Esfand [es-FAND] — The twelfth and last month, late February to late March.

Esteghlal [es-tegh-LAAL] — Persian, independence. One of Tehran's two great football clubs; the other is Persepolis.

Farvardin [far-var-DEEN] — The first month, beginning at the spring equinox.

Filtershekan [feel-ter-she-KAN] — Persian, filter-breaker. A virtual private network, used to reach blocked sites. An entirely ordinary household word.

Kahrizak [kah-ree-ZAK] — A district south of Tehran, and the forensic medical centre there.

Khāleh [khāa-LEH] — Persian, maternal aunt. What a child calls a woman who is not his aunt. A courtesy.

Khānum [KHAA-noom] — Persian, lady, madam. How a pupil addresses a woman teacher.

Khordad [khor-DAAD] — The third month, late May to late June.

Konkur [kon-KOOR] — from the French concours. The national university entrance examination, sat once a year.

Māmān [maa-MAAN] — Persian, mother. Also used by children of the household who are not hers.

Mehr [MEHR] — The seventh month, late September to late October; the school year begins in it.

Nān o namak [NAAN o na-MAK] — Persian, bread and salt. The bond created by eating at someone's table. The obligation runs from the one who eats to the one who feeds, and there is no phrase for it running the other way.

Nesbat [nes-BAT] — Arabic via Persian, relation, kinship.

Nesbat-etun chi-ye — what is your relation? An ordinary administrative question.

Ordibehesht [or-dee-be-HESHT] — The second month, late April to late May.

Salām [sa-LAAM] — Persian via Arabic, peace. The ordinary hello.

Tir [TEER] — The fourth month, late June to late July.

Toman [to-MAAN] — The unit Iranians count in, worth ten rials.

A mother in Tehran tells her son not to go into the street. He asks her where she thinks he got it.

That evening the country's internet and telephones are switched off together, and then the shooting starts, and nothing that happens can be filmed and sent anywhere.

On the third day his oldest friend comes up two flights of stairs with something in his pocket that he does not want to give her. She makes him.

What follows is six months in an ordinary flat, an old dream book that belonged to her mother, and a young man who reads it out flat, like a bus timetable.

She has not woken up.