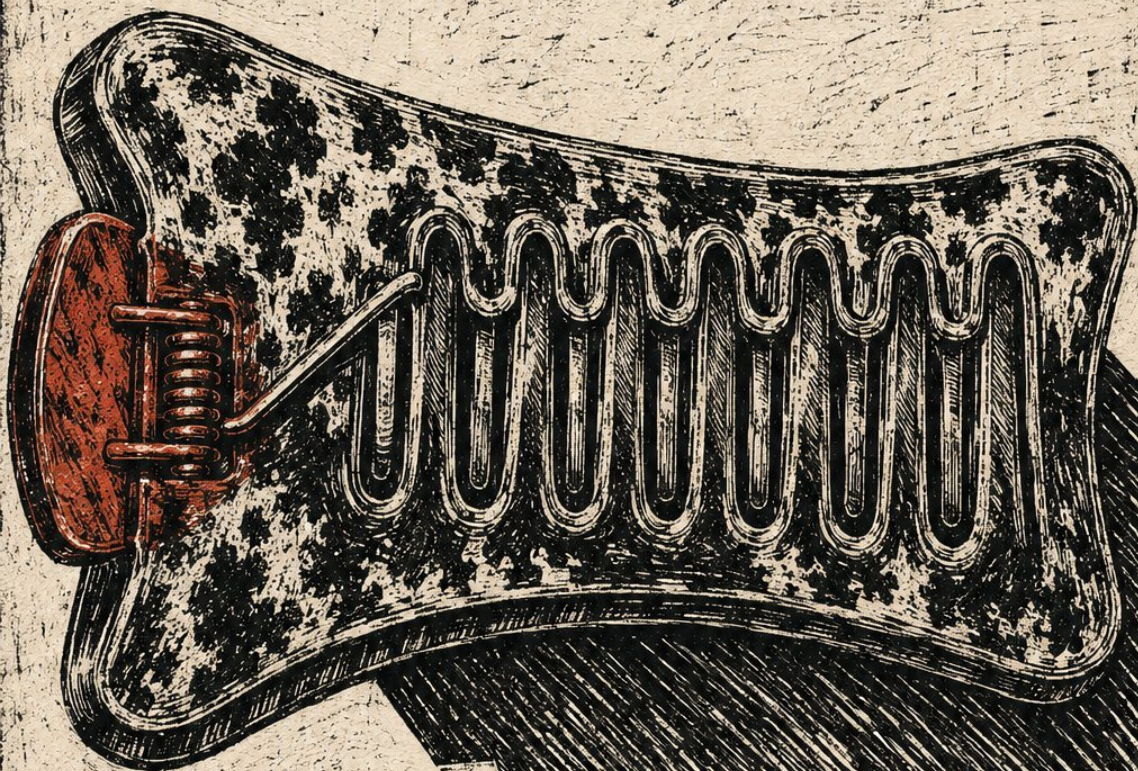


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 80



THE REMINDER

تذکر

C H E W Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE REMINDER

تذكر

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 80

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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FROM THE UNSAID

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach



For every woman
who was made to
write it out in her own hand.

SYNOPSIS

Tehran, Ordibehesht to Shahrivar 1404. Zeynab Moradi is thirty-eight, provincial, unmarried, and in the guidance patrol because there was a job in it. Three of them work out of one vehicle with no air conditioning through a summer that reaches forty-three degrees: Zeynab and Zohreh, who do the touching, and Hassan-agma, who drives and is not allowed to.

She is good at it in the way anybody is good at a thing done every day for twelve years. She has a private taxonomy for scarves that is on no form anywhere and that the women in that van will not say aloud to a superior. She can tell from a woman's hands whether the scarf will stay fixed past the corner. She has spent twelve years looking at the top two centimetres of strangers and has begun, without telling anybody, to lose the ability to see a face at all.

Nobody knows why she does it. Her brother has been ashamed of her since the first month and thinks it is the money, and she has never once corrected him.

What she has is nine seconds on a staircase in Ordibehesht 1392, when a man in a grey jacket with a folder under his arm told her that her brother's file was asleep and that nobody had any reason to wake it. It could be heard two ways. She heard it as an offer, and she took the job two weeks later, and in twelve years nobody has mentioned it again — no handler, no document, no envelope, no meeting. She comes in, and the file stays asleep. She cannot test it, because testing it means stopping, and if she is right then stopping is the thing that wakes it.

Then the application arrives. It is called Nāzer, the observer. A man at a window puts in a place, a date, a time and a registration plate, and the vehicle is flagged and a message goes to whoever owns it. It never gets tired and it never has a bad day. It does in one morning what her van does in half a year.

Her numbers fall. She starts coming in at seven. She moves her own line down half a hand's width and finds that it moves easily. And out on the pavements there is less to find every week, because the women have stopped covering — not by agreement and not behind anybody, and without asking permission from anyone — and a rule that everybody breaks is not a rule.

By Shahrivar she is working a full shift and issuing nothing, and the search she has begun for a file nobody will refuse her is about to reach the end of a corridor.

The Reminder is the second book in THE UNSAID. It is told in forty-nine entries, most of them headed by a pledge in a detained woman's own hand, and the last of them is hers.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book descends from the women who stopped.

There is no better name for them because they never took one. After 1401 (2022) women in Iran stopped covering their hair — not all at once, not by agreement, not behind anybody, and without anyone announcing that it had begun or that it was finished. There was no leader to arrest, no organisation to raid, no membership to infiltrate. There was nothing to negotiate with, because nothing had been demanded. Women simply went out with their heads uncovered, in numbers, every day, until the number was most of them, and a prohibition only functions while most people comply.

They are not in this book. That is deliberate. They appear as a street that gets harder to work, and they win, and the losing side narrates.

What is documented. The guidance patrol is a real formation, sitting inside the police rather than the judiciary, and the law behind it is the note to Article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code, Book Five. Women serve in it, and it is the women who make the approach, the assessment and the physical detention; the men drive and stand where they can be seen. The written pledge is the standard instrument and has been from the beginning — a woman arrested in 1360 (1981) was blindfolded, taken to a place she was not told the name of, questioned by a cleric and required to sign one before release; of the Tehran detentions in 1384 (2005) some two and a half thousand women were released on signing; one later drive put at least seven thousand names to the same sentence. Release is conditional on somebody bringing longer clothing to the door. The verbal warning is called a *tazakkor*, and it is the first rung of a published tariff that runs on through fines to a court.

The patrol was never abolished. The disbandment reported abroad in Azar 1401 (December 2022) was one prosecutor's remark, never confirmed by any government, denied at the time by state media, and reversed inside eighteen months.

The application is real and works as it is described here. A vetted member of the public submits a place, a date, a time and a registration plate; the vehicle is flagged; and an automatic message goes to the registered owner, who need not have been in the car, warning that it will be impounded. Alongside it there are drones, cameras on the major roads, and facial recognition on the gate of at least one Tehran university. The United Nations fact-finding mission set all of this out in Esfand 1403 (March 2025). In Tir 1403 (July 2024) a woman who received one of those messages and did not stop at a checkpoint was shot by police and is paralysed; in this book that reaches the van as a rumour, which is how it would have reached them.

What is not documented. Nothing about these officers as people. Their employment status, their rank structure, their pay, their shifts, their vans and everything said inside them are invention, and so is every person in this book. There is no record anywhere of an officer serving on an unspoken understanding about a relative's file, and the arrangement at the centre of this novella is invented outright. So is the field on the form, and so is the account of where the categories in the application came from. The four words the van uses for a scarf and its wearer, and the word for a woman nobody collects, are built to sound like trade slang and are not attested. The record is silent on what actually happens to a woman nobody comes for, and that silence is real, and it is the reason the word was invented to fill it.

Nobody knows how many women have been stopped since 1384 (2005). No figure is given here, and the narrator cannot produce one either.

No person in this book is a real person.

Everything in it that is cruel is administrative, and everything administrative in it was designed by somebody who went home at six.

Chew Z

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I. THE TAXONOMY

1.

SAHAR R., 23. HER OWN HAND.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

The first one of the day is always the easiest, because everybody is still polite.

It is twenty to ten on a Tuesday in Ordibehesht and the sun has not got into the metal yet. Zohreh is in the seat behind me with the clipboard on her knees. Hassan-agma — *āghā* [aa-GHAA] is only *sir*, and in that country every second man has one stuck on the end of his name — is at the wheel with the door open and one foot on the kerb, which is not allowed, and which he has done every day for four years.

The girl is twenty-three. She says twenty-three and I believe her, which is not always the case.

She has her scarf in her hand. Not on her shoulders, not around her neck. In her hand, the way you hold a bag of bread. When she saw us she did not put it on. She stopped walking and she looked at it, in her own hand, as though somebody else had put it there.

I say the sentence. She writes the sentence. That is the whole of it.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated. She has a good hand. Better than mine. She writes *covering* and then stops and looks up, because she has heard it in her own writing and it has gone strange on her, the way a word does.

Keep going, I tell her.

She keeps going.

There is a form for this and the form is called a *ta'ahhod* [ta-ah-HOD], an undertaking, and it is one sheet, and the top third of it is boxes and the bottom two thirds is empty for her to fill. Name. Father's name. Address. The number on her card. Then the sentence, in her writing, because a thing you have written yourself is supposed to sit differently in you than a thing you have signed. I

told her to put the date at the bottom as well. There is no box for the date.

I did not have to.

2.

NEDA K., 31. HER OWN HAND. SPELLED “UNDERTAKE” WITH ONE TA.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

What we are is the *gasht-e ershād* [GASHT-e er-SHAAD], the guidance patrol, and I have written that down because I have just noticed that I have not said it once, and neither has anybody in that van in twelve years.

Officially there is one offence and it is called *bad-hejābi* [bad-he-jaa-BEE], improper covering, and it means a woman with her whole head out in the middle of Vali-asr and it also means a woman whose scarf moved in a wind on a bridge. It is one word for both of those. You could not build a shelf with it.

So nobody uses it except upwards. You write it on the form and you say it to the supervisor and then you get back in the van and use the words that work.

Dekor [de-KOR]. A decoration. The scarf is present. It is on her. It is around the back of her neck like a towel after a swim and it is doing no work at all, and it is not going to, and both of you know it, and technically it is there.

Do khiyābun [do khee-yaa-BOON]. A two-street. She fixes it while you are watching, properly, with both hands and an apology, and she puts it back the way it was two streets later. Every woman in this van has been a two-street. Zohreh was a two-street for nine years before she came in.

Fizik [fee-ZEEK]. A physics. One clip, at the back, and the whole thing is up there against gravity and nothing is holding it. We bet on the distance. Nobody has ever collected, because to collect you would have to follow her, and none of us is going to do that on our own time.

Parvande [par-van-DEH]. A file. She is going to argue. She is going to be right. There goes your hour.

None of these words is on any form. Neda K. is a *dekor* and the form says *bad-hejābi* and that is the only lie on the page, and I wrote it.

3.

PARISA T., 19. PRINTED. SHE SAYS SHE CANNOT WRITE JOINED-UP.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

I called my brother on Thursday and he answered.

That is worth writing down because it does not happen every time. Mehdi has a way of letting it ring the whole way out and then sending a message an hour later saying he was driving.

How are you, I said.

Fine, he said.

How is your wife. How are the girls.

Fine. Everyone is fine.

Then a silence that I have learned to sit inside without moving, the way you sit still in front of a dog.

He asked if I still had the same job.

I said yes.

He said, right, and there was a sound behind him of a till, or a shutter, something metal and ordinary, and he said he had to go, and he went.

Twelve years. He thinks I do this for the money. He has thought so since the first month, and he said it once, in our mother's kitchen in Arak, in front of her, and I did not answer him and I have not answered him since. The money is eighteen million *tomān* [to-MAAN] a month and there is no arrangement of those figures where that is the reason.

I could tell him. It would take one sentence and I have had twelve years to build it.

I did not.

4.

MARYAM H., 44. HER OWN HAND. ASKED WHETHER SHE COULD WRITE IT IN HER OWN WORDS. SHE COULD NOT.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

By noon the van is thirty-eight degrees inside and by two it is over forty. The air conditioning was written up in Bahman. It was written up again in Farvardin. There is a form for that too.

The *chādor* [chaa-DOR], the full cloak, is one piece and it goes over everything, over the uniform, over the sleeves, and it has no fastening, so you hold it. You hold it with your teeth if your hands are full, which is a thing you learn in the first week and never mention to anybody outside.

Zohreh keeps a cloth in a plastic bag. A face cloth, wet in the morning at the tap by the depot, wrung out, sealed. By noon it is warm but it is still wet and that is the entire point.

She has never once offered it to me. Four years.

I have never asked. Four years.

We have talked about her mother's operation and about a man she nearly married in Karaj and about whether the new supervisor is a *zerang* [ze-RANG] — a sharp one, which is not a compliment — and we have never once discussed the cloth, and we are not going to, and if she offered it now I would say no.

Hassan-gha has the fan angled at his own face. He calls this position management.

5.

SETAREH B., 30. HER OWN HAND. WROTE IT TWICE. THE FIRST ONE HAD TWO WORDS MISSING.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

She was a two-street and I knew it while she was still fixing it.

You can tell by the hands. A woman who is going to leave it alone does it slowly, badly, one hand, looking somewhere else, and it stays. A woman who is going to put it back does it fast and well, both hands, tucks it, and looks at you when she has finished, because she wants to be released.

Setareh B. did it fast and well and looked at me. She was already two streets away in her head. She was standing in front of me with her scarf perfect and she had already taken it off.

And I made her write it out twice, because the first one said *I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering and that this will not be repeated* and it did not say *in public*.

She was polite about it. She said sorry. She wrote it again with the two words in, and it took half a minute, and she went, and I watched her get to the corner.

I did not have to.

There is no version of that form that any human being will ever read. It goes in the folder, the folder goes in the tray, the tray goes upstairs, and the number at the bottom of the page is the only part of it that has ever been looked at by anyone.

She wrote it twice for the number.

6.

**AZAM GH., 52. HER OWN HAND. HER DAUGHTER WROTE
THE ADDRESS.**

*I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in
public and that this will not be repeated.*

I got this job in a corridor.

Not the interview. The interview was in a room upstairs with three people and a form, and one of them asked me what my father did and one of them asked me to read a paragraph aloud, and it went the way those go.

The corridor was before that, and it was about Mehdi, and it lasted about as long as it takes to walk past somebody.

He was in plain clothes. Grey jacket, no tie, a folder under his arm the way men carry folders when the folder is not the point. He said my name. Not *khānom* [khaa-NOM], madam, and the surname. My name, both parts, the way you say a thing you have just read.

He said: your brother's file is asleep.

Then he said the other part, which I am not going to write down yet, because I have said it to myself so many times in twelve years that I no longer entirely trust the shape of it, and I want to put down the other things first.

Then he went past me and down the stairs.

That is all of it. Nine seconds, maybe ten. I have never seen him again and I would not know him now.

Two weeks later I sat the test.

7.

**FARZANEH M., 35. HER OWN HAND. ASKED IF SHE COULD
KEEP A PHOTOGRAPH OF IT. SHE COULD NOT.**

*I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in
public and that this will not be repeated.*

The talk is a script and it is four points and you are supposed to give it before the form.

Point one is that you are her sister. Point two is the honour of the family. Point three is the law, and there is a phrasing for point three that is meant to sound like advice. Point four is the consequence, which you deliver softly, and it is the only one of the four that has ever changed anyone's behaviour.

The official time for the talk is three to five minutes.

The record is ninety-one seconds and it is Zohreh's and she got it on a Wednesday last summer on a woman outside the bank on Motahhari, and she got all four points in and she did not rush and she did not skip. We have discussed the ninety-one seconds more than we have discussed any other thing that has ever happened in that vehicle.

Hassan-aga says the record does not count because the subject had had it before and half of it did not need saying.

Hassan-aga has never given the talk. He is not allowed to give the talk, he is not allowed to make the approach, and he is not allowed to put his hand on anybody, which is the whole reason he is there and the whole reason we are. He drives, he stands where he can be seen, and he has opinions about technique.

His opinion is that we come in too square. He says you should come in at an angle, from the side, so she does not feel surrounded.

Zohreh asked him once how he knew.

He said: I watch.

8.

NOTHING. SHE WOULD NOT WRITE IT.

—
A *parvande*h is a woman who is right, and this one was right, and it took an hour and ten minutes.

She was fifty-one and she taught chemistry at a school in the sixth district and she had a scarf on. Not around her neck. On. Back off the forehead by a good ten centimetres, which is the whole business, which is the entire thing this job is about, and she knew it and I knew it and we both knew there is nothing written down anywhere in the world that says ten centimetres.

She asked me what the measurement was.

I gave her point three.

She asked me again what the measurement was, in the same voice, without any edge on it, the way you ask a second time at a counter. She had her card out already and she was holding it up and she kept holding it up the whole time, which people do when they are late for something.

I said it is a matter of general standards.

She said: right.

And then she waited, because she thought there was going to be more, and there was not, and after a while she put the card down on the desk and looked at the window.

I could have written *bad-hejābi* on the form and left the sentence blank and put it in the tray. Nobody upstairs would ever have looked.

I kept her an hour and ten minutes and she did not write it, and at twenty past two I was too hot to go on with it and I let her go, and she said thank you, which she should not have, and went off to whatever she was late for.

I did not have to keep her.

9.

SHIVA A., 28. HER OWN HAND. LEFT-HANDED.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

Something has happened to me and I have known about it for about three years and I have never said it to anybody.

I do not see faces any more. I see the top of them.

It is not that I cannot recognise people. I can. I know Zohreh, I know my mother, I know a woman I stopped in Sattarkhan in the year before last. But what arrives first, before the face, before whether she is young or tired or about to cry, is the line. The border. The two centimetres where the cloth sits or does not sit, and the gap above it.

It comes first now. It comes before the person.

I went home to Arak at *Nowrūz* [now-ROOZ], the new year, and my mother met me at the door and what I saw was a hairline. Grey at the front, thinning at the part, a scarf sitting back off it because she is in her own house. I saw a *dekor*. My mother, in her own doorway, at the new year.

Then I saw my mother. It took maybe half a second.

Half a second is not a long time. But it goes in that order every time now, and it did not always, and I know which way it is going.

10.

GOLNAZ S., 22. HER OWN HAND. WROTE HER MOTHER'S NAME UNDER FATHER'S NAME AND HAD TO CROSS IT OUT.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

The supervisor is thirty-four and he is scrupulous about the numbers and about nothing else in this world.

He wants twelve. Twelve is not written down anywhere. It is not a quota, because there is no quota, because a quota would mean the

thing was a target and not a service. Twelve is what he says on a Sunday morning in the room with the map on the wall, and what he says is: last week we were at nine.

He does not say what he wants. He says where we were.

In my second year we did twenty-two on a Thursday in Tajrish and I went home and could not eat. In my fifth year twelve was an easy day and you could do it before lunch on Enqelāb and go and sit somewhere.

Last week we were at nine.

The week before we were at nine.

Nobody in that room said anything about it. He said the number and he looked at the map and we all looked at the map, and there is nothing on the map, it is a map of the district, it has been on that wall since before I came, and every one of us looked at it for four or five seconds as though it had something on it.

Then we got in the vans.

11.

NASIM D., 24. HER OWN HAND. ASKED WHAT HAPPENS TO IT AFTERWARDS.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

There is a man who sends in forty a week and I have never met him and I never will.

He is a number. All of them are numbers, and most of them send one or two and then stop, the way people do, but this one has been going for a year and a half and he does not stop and he does not slow down in the heat.

This was before the application. The reports came to us on paper then, in a bundle, off the telephone line, typed up by somebody downstairs with the caller's number turned into a report number at the top. It is the same numbers now on a screen and it is the same man. Forty a week. Mornings, and again in the early evening.

Never at night. Never on a Friday, and it took me a long time to notice that.

Always the same junction. Always southbound, never north.

So: he is at a window. It is a corner flat, second or third floor, because he can read a plate but he cannot always read a face. He has a chair there. He has had that chair moved to that window, at some point, by himself, and there was a day when he moved it, and somebody in that flat watched him move it and said something or said nothing.

He is retired or he is not working, because nobody with somewhere to be is at a window at that hour, twice a day, for a year and a half.

And there is a woman in that flat who has stopped asking what he is doing at the window.

I know all this and I do not know his name and he does not know mine, and between us we have put more women in that van than any two officers in this district.

12.

HAYEDEH P., 39. HER OWN HAND. HER HUSBAND CAME IN FOURTEEN MINUTES.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

You are not released. You are collected.

That is not a rule and nobody says it aloud, but it is how the room works. She writes the undertaking, and then somebody comes — a husband, a father, a brother, a son if he is old enough to look like one — and he brings a coat that is longer, or a scarf that is bigger, and he stands at the desk with it folded over his arm like a waiter, and she goes out wearing what he brought.

Fourteen minutes is fast. Fourteen minutes means he was already in the area, or she has been through this before and there is a bag in the car.

Two hours is normal. Four hours happens. And then there are the ones nobody comes for, and there is a word for them, and the word

is *moondani* [moon-da-NEE], a stayer. From *moondan* [moon-DAN], to stay. It is not an official word. It is the word you use at the door of the room when the shift is ending and there are two of them still sitting on the bench and somebody has to decide who is going to be late home.

Every trade has a word like that.

Zohreh says *moondani* the way you would say *rain*. Hassan-agma says it with the second syllable stretched, which for some reason is funnier, and it is funny, and we laugh, and I have laughed at it every time.

13.

NO NAME. NO CARD. NO FATHER'S NAME. THE SENTENCE IS IN MY HAND, NOT HERS.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

There was a Thursday at the end of Khordad when we had four at six o'clock.

Four is not a number. Four is not low. Four is the kind of number where somebody upstairs asks whether the vehicle went out.

It was not that they were covered. I want to put that down accurately because I have heard people say it and it is not what happened. They were not covered. Half of Mirdamad was not covered and it was half past five in the afternoon and it was warm and they were walking to the metro and to the shops and to wherever, with their heads bare, in twos and threes, not fast, not looking at us.

We were parked in the shade of the pedestrian bridge with the door open.

And I sat there for forty minutes and I did not get out.

I want to be honest about the reason, because the reason is not the one anybody would guess. It was not fear and it was not pity and it was not the heat. It was that I could not choose. You need one to be more than the others. That is the whole mechanism. You stand at

the edge of a pavement and one of them is more, and you go to that one, and the rest keep walking and nothing has happened to them. That is how it has worked every day for twelve years and it works because most of them are covered and a few are not.

Take that away and it is just a street with people on it.

Zohreh said, are we going out, and I said in a minute.

At ten past six I got out and stopped a girl with a bag of oranges and she did not have a card and she would not give her father's name, and I filled in the form myself, and I wrote the sentence in my own handwriting on the line where hers should be, and I put it in the folder.

That made five.

I did not have to.

II. NĀZER

14.

ELHAM V., 29. HER OWN HAND. THIRD TIME. SHE HAS THE OTHER TWO ON HER PHONE.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

They put it on the board in the room with the map, on a Sunday morning at the start of Khordad, and there were two men from outside standing at the front who did not give their unit.

The younger one did the talking and he was good at it. He had the projector working before anybody sat down, which nobody in that building has ever managed, and he called us *hamkarān* [ham-kaa-RAAN], colleagues, which nobody in that building has ever done either.

It is called *Nāzer* [naa-ZER].

He said the name twice and let it sit, and one or two people made a small sound, because *nāzer* means the observer, the one who watches, and it also means an overseer, a man who signs off on a job, and everybody in the room knew both meanings and nobody said anything.

Here is what it does, and I want to write it plainly because everybody who talks about it gets it wrong and makes it larger than it is.

A person sees a car. In the car is a woman with her head uncovered. The person opens the application on his telephone and he puts in four things: where, what date, what time, and the registration plate. That is all he puts in. He does not photograph her, he does not write her name, he does not know her name.

The plate goes up. It goes to us in the vans and it goes to the cameras on the roads and it goes, within a few seconds, to the man whose name the car is registered in, as a message on his telephone, telling him that if it happens again the vehicle will be taken.

Not to her. To whoever owns the car.

The younger man said: think of it as one hundred thousand more of you. He meant it kindly.

15.

REPORT 4,118. MIRDAMAD, SOUTHBOUND, 11:40. PLATE ONLY.

Your vehicle has been recorded in violation of the covering regulations. In the event of repetition the vehicle will be impounded.

That is the message. That is the whole message.

I have it written down because I asked one of the technicians to show me, and he turned the screen round without thinking about it, the way you would show somebody a bus timetable.

Twenty-one words. Nobody wrote them this morning. Somebody wrote them once, at some point, in some office, and they will now be sent several thousand times a day until the end of the world, and the man who wrote them has probably forgotten and is doing something else.

I have said my sentence out loud, to a woman's face, in a room, a great many thousand times.

She writes it. I watch her write it. Then she is collected.

Those two things are not the same size, and the thing about the message is not that it is crueller. It is not crueller. It is nothing at all. It is a piece of weather that arrives on your telephone and it does not know your name and it will not remember you and there is nobody in it to be angry with.

The car is Elham V.'s own and it is in her own name, which is not common and which is why the messages come to her and not to anybody else. She has the other two on her phone. She showed me. She scrolled back and found the first one, from last summer, and held it up so I could see that she had it.

I asked her why she keeps them.

She said she does not know. She said her sister deletes hers straight away and she has never got round to it.

16.

SIMA R., 33. HER OWN HAND. ASKED IF THE FORM STILL COUNTS.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

There is a field on the form that was not there when I started.

It is at the bottom left, under the address block, in the space that used to be blank, and it says *reason for selection*, and it is three ruled lines.

Nobody explained it. It arrived in the pad, in the new pads, which came in a box in the second week of Khordad last year, and Zohreh noticed it before I did and said *what is this now* and filled hers in with a dash.

I fill mine in properly.

I have always been a person who fills things in properly and I am not going to stop at thirty-eight because a box is stupid. So on that Tuesday I wrote *scarf carried in hand, not worn, did not adjust on approach*, and the next day I wrote *decoration only, no attempt*, except that I did not write *decoration* because that is not a word you can put on a form, so I wrote it out longhand: *scarf present but not covering the hair, positioned at the back of the neck*.

It takes about twenty seconds a form.

Zohreh says nobody reads it. Zohreh says nobody reads any of it and she is right about the sentence and I assume she is right about this.

I did not have to fill it in.

I have filled in every one of them since, and I want that written down here in my own hand, because there is going to come a point in this account where somebody reads this and thinks I did not know what I was doing, and I want it clear that I did it carefully and I did it for a year and I did it because I am tidy.

17.

**ZAHRA A., 25. HER OWN HAND. WROTE IT WITHOUT
LOOKING AT ME.**

*I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in
public and that this will not be repeated.*

It flagged a bald man.

He was driving a white Peugeot down Mirdamad at nine in the morning with the window open and he is sixty-one years old and has no hair on his head at all, and somebody at a window put his plate in, and the machine sent his own telephone a message about the covering regulations, and he came into the station to complain about it and would not leave for two hours.

The whole thing was on the desk downstairs and by lunchtime there was nobody in the building who had not heard.

Then in Tir it flagged a mannequin.

A delivery van, back doors open, a shop mannequin lying on its side in the back with a wig on it, going up Jordan at half past four. Somebody put the plate in. And then — this is the part — the same van went past the same window on the way back an hour later and he put it in again.

Two reports. Same mannequin. Same wig.

I have never seen that room happier. Hassan-agma went out and bought sweets with his own money, which he has done twice in four years, the other time being when his sister had a son. Somebody drew the mannequin on the back of a form. Somebody said we should send it a talk. Zohreh said, in her flat voice, without looking up: *she was a two-street*, and I laughed until I had to put my hand on the wall.

We were still saying it in Mordad.

I want to be honest that it was funny. I have gone over it since and looked for the part where it stops being funny and I cannot find it. It was a mannequin. Nothing happened to anybody.

That is the only day this year that all three of us were happy at the same time.

18.

NASRIN F., 47. HER OWN HAND. HER SON CAME. HE IS TWELVE.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

We were at nine in Ordibehesht and we were at seven by the middle of Khordad and in the last week of Khordad we were at five.

The supervisor did not say anything for a fortnight. Then on the last Sunday of Khordad he said: the vans are underperforming against the application.

Not *we*. The vans. In one sentence he had put himself somewhere else.

He said the application in this district is producing fourteen hundred a week.

Fourteen hundred.

Three of us in that vehicle, eight hours a day, six days, at five.

I did the arithmetic in the room and then I did it again in the van because I did not believe the first one, and it comes out that the thing at the windows of this district is doing in one morning what the three of us do in half a year.

Zohreh said: good. Let them.

She meant it. She has four years in and she would take the desk tomorrow. I have twelve and I cannot take the desk, because the desk is not the job, and if I am not doing the job then I am not doing anything, and if I am not doing anything then there is a question about the last twelve years that I have never once let get all the way to the front of my head.

So I started going out at seven.

Nobody asked me to. The shift starts at half past eight.

I did not have to.

19.

**MAHSA T., 21. HER OWN HAND. SPELLED HER OWN
SURNAME WRONG AND CORRECTED IT.**

*I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in
public and that this will not be repeated.*

Padding is not lying. I want to be exact, because there is a word for what I started doing in Tir and it is not the one people would reach for.

You do not invent a woman. Nobody invents a woman. There is a card number on the form and a card number is a real thing and it is checkable and any officer who put a false one on a form would be gone inside a month.

Padding is going lower.

Every officer has a line. It is not written down and it is not the same for any two of us and you find yours in about the first four months and after that it does not move. Above the line you stop her. Below the line you let her go, and you do not think about it, and it does not cost you anything, and by the end of the day you cannot remember her.

Mine was a hand's width. That is roughly what it was. If the hair was back past a hand's width I went, and if it was less I did not, and that had been true since my second year and I had never once had to think about it.

In Tir I moved it.

Not far. Half of that. And what I want to put down is how it felt, because it did not feel like anything. It felt like nothing at all. I went out one morning at seven and I moved it and I stopped four women before ten who I would not have looked at twice in Khordad, and every one of them was completely ordinary about it, and I filled in the reason-for-selection box on all four.

The line is not a rule. I know that. I have known that for twelve years.

But I had thought of it as a thing about me, the way you have a way of taking tea, and it turns out it is a dial, and it turns out it goes

down, and it turns out I can turn it while thinking about something else.

I did not have to move it. Nobody asked me for a number.

20.

ROBAB S., 58. HER OWN HAND, VERY SLOWLY. SHE ASKED ME TO SAY IT AGAIN THREE TIMES.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

The man in the corridor had a folder under his arm.

I said grey jacket before and it was grey, but the thing I keep is the folder, because it was under his left arm and he had to shift it to get past me, and there was a half-second where he was turned towards me because of the folder and not because of me.

He said my name and then he said: your brother's file is asleep.

And then he said the second part, and the second part is seven words, and I am going to write them down now.

Nobody has any reason to wake it.

That is it. That is all of it. He said it while turning past me with a folder under his arm and then he went down the stairs, and the stairs at that building are stone and they are loud, and I stood there and listened to him go all the way to the bottom.

Now.

You can hear that as a statement about the world. Nobody has any reason. Nothing is happening. Go home, it is fine, nobody is interested in your brother.

Or you can hear it as a statement about a condition. *Nobody has any reason — yet, and while things stay as they are, and provided.*

I heard it the second way. I have heard it the second way for twelve years, in that stairwell, at half past ten in the morning, in Ordibehesht 1392. And I have never been able to get back to the moment before I heard it, to find out which way it was actually said.

21.

NO NAME. VEHICLE STOP. SHE WAS THE PASSENGER. HER FATHER OWNS THE CAR.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

There is a story that came round in Tir and I am putting it here because it is the only thing all summer that stopped that van being funny for a whole afternoon.

Somebody's cousin's husband is traffic police up near the sea. And he said that last year a woman got one of the messages on her telephone while she was driving, on the road, and she saw a checkpoint ahead of her and she did not stop, and they fired at the car, and she is alive and she does not walk.

That is the story as it reached us. I do not know if it is true.

Zohreh does not believe it. Zohreh says a message does not make anybody drive at a checkpoint and there is more to it that we are not being told, and she said that twice, which is once more than she needed to.

Hassan-agma believes it and said so and then did not say anything else for the rest of the shift, which for him is a great deal.

I do not know. I have thought about it in the way you think about a thing you have decided not to find out.

What I keep is a smaller part of it. The message goes to the registered owner. If the car is her father's, the message goes to her father. If the car is her husband's, it goes to her husband. She is driving along a road in the sun and she has no idea, and the telephone that knows about her is in a pocket in another city.

That is all I have and I am not going to go looking for the rest of it.

22.

PEGAH N., 30. HER OWN HAND. ASKED WHETHER IT GOES ON A COMPUTER.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

I told her no.

That was not a lie at the time. The form goes in the folder, the folder goes in the tray, the tray goes upstairs. I have never in twelve years seen anybody put one of those sheets near a computer.

She asked well then why do you take my card number.

I gave her point three.

She said: I'm not arguing. I'm asking. And then she said all right when I did not answer, and put her card away, and that was the end of it.

I let her go and I got back in and Zohreh said *parvande*? and I said no. Because she was not. She did not argue and she did not raise her voice and she took forty seconds.

I sat in the seat and I could not think of what I would have said if she had pressed it.

I do not know where the forms go. I know where they go for the first nine metres and then I do not know. I have been putting them in that tray since I was twenty-six.

23.

SHOKUFEH B., 26. HER OWN HAND. LEFT IMMEDIATELY. NOBODY CAME; SHE WALKED.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

Here is the sentence, and it was said in the van at twenty past two in Tir with the doors open in the shade behind the mosque on Shariati, with all three of us too hot to sit up straight, and nobody reacted to it at all. Hassan-aga had been complaining about the

fourteen hundred a week and about what it means for the vehicle allocation next year.

And Zohreh said, without opening her eyes:

The thing never has a bad day. That's all it is. It never lets one go.

Hassan-agma said something about vehicle allocation.

I have gone back to that sentence more times this summer than to anything anybody has said to me in years.

Because it is true and it is the whole of it. Everybody in that van lets ones go. Every single day. I let go the ones below the line and Zohreh lets go anybody who reminds her of her sister, and she has said that out loud, and I let go a woman on Enqelāb three years ago because she was carrying a cake and she had it balanced on both hands and I could not make her put it down.

That is not mercy. I would not use that word. It is that we get tired, and we get hot, and we have a thing on at six, and there is a certain hour of the afternoon when a woman has to be quite far over the line before any of us can be bothered.

And the thing at the window does not get tired and does not have a thing on at six.

It is better at this job than I am, and the entire reason is that it is worse as a person.

24.

AZITA K., 41. HER OWN HAND. TWO PAGES; SHE WROTE OUT AN EXPLANATION UNDERNEATH AND I TOOK BOTH.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

I saw a woman on Vali-asr at the end of Tir and I could not find her face.

I do not mean I could not remember it. She was in front of me, an arm's length, in the sun, and she was talking, and I was looking directly at her, and what I had was a hairline and a gap and a very great deal of nothing underneath. It lasted perhaps three seconds. Then it came back and she was a woman of about forty with a mark

on her cheek from her sunglasses and she was saying something reasonable about her mother's appointment.

I want to be accurate about this because I am not ill. I sleep. I eat. I do not see things that are not there.

What I have is the opposite. I have stopped seeing a thing that is there.

I read once, years ago in a magazine at my aunt's, about the people who check the printing on books. That they read the same page nine or ten times and after a while they are not reading it, they are only looking for the mistake, and one of them said that he could go through a whole page of a poem and come out the other side knowing there was nothing wrong with it and not knowing what it was about.

I have looked at the top two centimetres of more women than I can put a number to, and past the tops of a great many more than that.

I did not set out to. Nobody sets out to. You do the job and the job is the border, and after a while the border is what arrives, and the face is a thing you have to go and get afterwards, and some days now it is three seconds away and some days I do not go and get it at all.

25.

NO UNDERTAKING. REPORT 4,118 AND REPORT 4,119.

SAME PLATE. ONE MINUTE APART.

Your vehicle has been recorded in violation of the covering regulations. In the event of repetition the vehicle will be impounded.

He does that. He sends the same one twice, a minute apart, and he has done it ten or twelve times this summer and every one of them is between half past ten and noon.

I have thought about why and I think it is that the application does not tell you it worked. You put in the plate and you press the thing and it goes, and there is no sound and no receipt and nothing comes back to say *received*. And he is at that window and he has done his part and he does not know whether anything happened, so a minute later, in case, he does it again.

He is worried they will miss it.

Forty a week for a year and a half and nobody has ever told him that a single one of them landed. He does not know that we exist. He does not know there is a van. For all he knows he has been putting registration plates into a telephone every morning for eighteen months and nothing at the other end has ever once moved.

He would keep doing it either way. That is what I have concluded and I am fairly sure of it.

I have been coming in at seven for a month and nobody has told me that a single one of my forms has been read by anyone.

I would keep doing it either way.

The difference between me and the man at the window is that he thinks he is helping.

26.

NO NAME. VEHICLE IMPOUNDED BEFORE ARRIVAL. NO UNDERTAKING TAKEN.

A car was taken on Jordan in the first week of Mordad and we were four minutes away and we went, because that is what you do, and by the time we got there it was on the truck and there was nobody to talk to.

The woman had gone. Somebody said she got in a taxi. Somebody else said her sister came.

There was no form. There was nothing to write. There was nothing for me to say to anybody, because the person the thing had happened to had already left, and the person it had officially happened to was a man in Shahriar who has not been in that car for six weeks and who received a message at 11:41.

Zohreh said, are we writing anything.

And I said no, there is nothing to write, and we stood there in the sun next to a space where a car had been.

I got back in the van and I sat with the folder on my knees and the folder was empty and it was ten past twelve.

Here is the thing I did not say out loud.

For twelve years the last part of this job has been a woman writing a sentence in her own hand. Somebody else's words, in her writing, on a page with her name on it, and the whole idea of it — the entire idea, the reason the form is built that way — is that it goes into her differently because her own hand made it.

And now there is no hand and no sentence and no page and no name, and it works better.

Everything I do is the part they were able to remove.

III. WHO COMES

27.

SORAYA M., 36. HER OWN HAND. THE LAST ONE I TOOK IN TIR.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

On the ninth of Mordad we worked Vali-asr from half past eight until six and we took two.

Not two an hour. Two.

I am putting the street down because a person reading this will want to say we were in the wrong place, and Vali-asr at the end of the afternoon is not the wrong place, it has never been the wrong place, it is the place you go when the supervisor has said a number and you have four hours.

I stood at the top of the steps by the bank for a good while and I counted, in my head, the way you count without deciding to.

Between four and half past, going both ways, I made it something over three hundred women. I stopped counting because I lost my place twice.

Covered, in the way this job means covered — I do not have a figure. I got to seven and lost the thread and did not start again, and I am not going to put a number in here that I would not put on a form.

Anybody who has stood on that pavement this summer knows the size of it. Every one of us in that district knows it and not one of us has said it in that room.

The supervisor did not ask about the two.

He has stopped asking. He did not announce that he had stopped. There was a Sunday in the middle of Tir where he said the number, and then a Sunday where he did not, and I do not think anybody else noticed, and I have thought about it every day since.

28.

NEGAR H., 24. HER OWN HAND. ASKED IF I WAS ALL RIGHT.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

I have not written down what I actually do all day now, so here it is.

I go out at seven. I come back at seven. In between there is a great deal of sitting in a hot vehicle in the shade of things, and there is the drive, and there is a stretch in the middle of the day where the three of us do not speak because there is nothing to say and it is too hot to make anything up.

And since the last week of Tir there is a thing I do that the other two do not know about.

I have started looking for my brother's file.

I want to write down why now and not twelve years ago, because that is the part that will look strange.

For twelve years the arrangement had a currency and the currency was me doing this. Every day I came in, I paid, and it stayed asleep. I did not think about it in those words. You do not think about your own breathing.

But the thing at the windows is doing fourteen hundred a week and I am doing two, and I have started coming in at seven and moving my line down half a hand's width, and at some point in Tir a question arrived that I could not put back.

If they do not need me to do this any more, what have I been paying with since Khordad?

And if I am not paying, how long does a thing stay asleep?

29.

FARIBA D., 32. HER OWN HAND. WHILE SHE WROTE IT SHE HUMMED.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

The young man from the briefing came back in Mordad, on his own this time, to do what he called a familiarisation.

He is about twenty-nine and he is not from the police and he is polite in a way that has been taught to him rather than done to him, and I liked him, which I want on the record.

He had the laptop open on the table in the room with the map and he was showing us the part of the application we would use, which is the list, which is the plates coming in. And he was going quickly because it is not complicated and because we are three people in a hot room in Mordad.

Then he clicked past a screen.

I asked him to go back.

It was the classification. It is what the person at the window chooses, on his telephone, after he has put in the plate. Four buttons, and under each button a line of small grey type.

The first one said *covering present, not covering the hair, at the back of the neck or shoulders.*

The second one said *covering adjusted in the presence of the officer or camera.*

The third one said *covering retained by a single fastening.*

The fourth one said *subject disputes and delays.*

Nobody in that room said anything.

I asked him where those came from.

He said, and he was pleased to be asked, that they had been built out of what he called *the field record*. He said the earlier categories had been too broad and there had been a piece of work over about a year to get them down to four, from the descriptions, from the

forms. He said: your people wrote these, actually. He said it as a compliment. He said it is much better when it comes from the field.

Zohreh looked at the wall.

Reason for selection. Three ruled lines. Twenty seconds a form.

I did every one of them.

I did not have to.

30.

MOJGAN A., 45. HER OWN HAND. I DID NOT WANT TO TAKE IT AND I TOOK IT.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

I went to Mehdi's shop on a Friday.

He sells parts. Not a garage — a shop, with a counter and a wall of small drawers behind it, and he has been in that shop for nine years and I have been in it four times.

He was on the ladder when I came in. He came down the ladder in no hurry at all, which is his way of telling you something, and he stood behind the counter with his hands on it, on his own side, in his own shop.

I said I was passing.

He said, right.

I asked about the girls. He told me about the girls. The older one is doing well at mathematics and he is proud of it and for a minute or two we were two people who grew up in the same house.

Then a customer came in and Mehdi served him and I stood by the drawers and waited, and while I was waiting I looked at the back of my brother's head and thought: I could say it now.

I have been doing this because of you.

Twelve years and one sentence and it would take four seconds. And what I understood, standing by the drawers, is that I have never once been stopped by fear of what he would say. That is the story I have told myself and it is not the story.

What stops me is that the second it is out of my mouth it becomes a thing that can be examined. He would ask who said it. He would ask when, and where, and what exactly, and whether there was anything in writing, and he is not a clever man but he is a man who has spent nine years telling people whether a part will fit.

And I have known for a long time that it would not survive four minutes of my brother.

The customer went. Mehdi turned round and said: was there something.

I said no. I said I was passing.

31.

**NO NAME. SHE GAVE A CARD NUMBER THAT WAS NOT
HERS. IT TOOK ME UNTIL THE EVENING TO SEE IT.**

*I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in
public and that this will not be repeated.*

Nobody has refused me anything.

I want to put that down early because it is the whole shape of it. In three weeks of asking about my brother's file I have not been refused once, by anybody, and I have not got a single thing.

The badge opens the door of the building. That is real and it is not nothing. I have gone into three offices this summer that a woman off the street cannot go into, and in every one of them somebody has stood up and been pleasant to me.

Here is how it goes.

You explain. They listen properly — they are good at listening, it is most of the job. Then they say the thing that is true, which is that this is not their section. They tell you which section it is. They are helpful about it. Sometimes they write the name down for you. You go to that section. It is in another building, or it is upstairs, or it is a man who is at a course this week.

He is back on Sunday. On Sunday he is very sorry, it is not held here, it would be held centrally, and anything from before the

change would have gone across in the transfer, and does she have the number.

I do not have the number. I have a name and a year.

He says, without any unkindness at all, that it is difficult without the number.

I have been at this since the last week of Tir. Nobody has said no. I have been passed along a corridor for three weeks by people who were sorry, and there is no wall anywhere to put your hand on, and I have started to understand that this is not what it feels like when something is being hidden.

This is what it feels like when there is nothing there.

I did not let myself finish that thought until the third.

I went back to two of those offices a second time, after they had already told me.

I did not have to.

32.

SHAHLA E., 38. HER OWN HAND. THE SAME AGE AS ME. I NOTICED AND I WISH I HAD NOT.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

Grey jacket. No tie. Folder under the left arm.

Half past ten in the morning, Ordibehesht 1392, the stone stairs at the end of the upper corridor.

Zeynab Moradi. Your brother's file is asleep. Nobody has any reason to wake it.

That is what I have. Now here is what I have started doing this summer, which I would not recommend to anybody.

I have started saying it out loud, in the van, under the noise of the engine, to hear it.

Because it changes. *Nobody has any reason to wake it* — flat, at the end of a breath, a man telling you the weather. Or with a small lift on *reason*, which makes it a hint. Or with the stress on *nobody*,

which makes it almost a warning, which is a third thing entirely and one I only found in Mordad.

They are all available. Every one of them fits in the mouth. And I cannot get behind them to the one that was actually said, because the recording I have is not a recording, it is a thing I have played several thousand times and each playing has been made out of the last one.

There is something else and I have been putting off writing it.

He said my name. I have always taken that as the proof — that he knew who I was, that he had come to find me, that it was meant.

He had a folder under his arm.

33.

NO UNDERTAKING. REPORT 16,740. THE TRUCK GOT THERE FIRST AGAIN.

Your vehicle has been recorded in violation of the covering regulations. In the event of repetition the vehicle will be impounded.

I did not know Zohreh on Enqelāb.

She had gone across the road to buy water and she came back along the pavement towards the van and I watched a woman come along the pavement towards the van for perhaps five seconds, and I was reading her the whole way, and what came was a *chādor* and a hairline behind glass and a distance, and then she got to the door and it was Zohreh and she had my water.

Four years I have sat in that vehicle with her. She said something about the queue. I said something back. She did not notice.

That is the part I want down. Nothing happened. Nobody saw anything. There is no one in the world I could tell.

And I have started to understand what this actually is, because I had it wrong all summer. I thought I was losing faces.

I am not losing faces. My mother is my mother across a room. Mehdi is Mehdi from the back, on a ladder.

What I have lost is faces *on that pavement*. Anyone in that frame, at that distance, coming towards the van — the equipment does not come on. It is not a person approaching, it is a border approaching, and the face does not load until she is close enough to speak to.

I did that. Not the job. I did it, eight hours a day, on purpose, for twelve years, because it is faster, and because a face slows you down, and because if you see the face you have to decide about a person and if you see the border you only have to decide about a border.

It is the most useful thing I ever learned and I cannot put it down.

34.

**NO NAME. NO UNDERTAKING TAKEN. SHE WAS
SEVENTEEN AND SHE WAS THERE UNTIL HALF PAST TEN.**

—

A *moondani* on the fourteenth of Mordad.

Seventeen. Not a card, a school card, which is a thing that happens and is not a problem. She gave a number and the number was a landline and the landline rang out at half past four and at half past five and at seven.

She sat on the bench.

There is a bench in that room and it is against the long wall and it has been there since before I came, and I have watched several hundred women sit on it and every one of them sits in the same way, which is forward, with the hands together, looking at the door. At half past seven Zohreh went home because her mother is not well.

At eight Hassan-agma put his head in and said the thing he says, with the second syllable stretched, and it is the same word he has said in that doorway a hundred times and I have laughed at it a hundred times, and he said it, and there was a silence of about two seconds, and he said: well. Right. And he went.

He did not do anything wrong. It was the same as it has always been. He said it the same.

At half past ten a man came who was her uncle and he had a long coat over his arm folded the way they all fold it, and he did not look at her and he did not look at me, and she put the coat on in front of us both and they went.

I did not take an undertaking. There was no point. She had been sitting there for six hours and there was nothing I could have made her write that would have gone into her more than the bench did.

I did not have to keep her past seven. Nobody had said anything about seven.

35.

PARVANEH T., 51. HER OWN HAND. SHE HAD ONE FROM 1399 IN HER BAG AND SHOWED ME.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

There is a word for what I do and it is on every form I have ever filled in and I have not written it down once in all these pages.

Tazakkor [ta-zak-KOR]. A reminder.

That is the official name for it, and it is the first rung, and there are four. First a *tazakkor*. Then five hundred thousand tomān. Then a million. Then from the fourth time it goes to the judge and it is three to six million and it is not mine any more.

Twelve years and I have never once been on rungs two, three or four. Those are a computer and a court. I am the reminder. That is the entire authority I have ever held: I am permitted to remind a woman of a thing, once, in the street, and then write it down.

I gave one on the sixteenth of Mordad to a woman outside the fruit shop on Dowlat.

She listened. She was perfectly pleasant. She waited for me to finish, which not everybody does, and when I had finished she said *chashm* [CHASHM] — on my eye, which means yes, of course, at once — the way you say it to an aunt, and she picked up her bag.

And then she stood there for a moment because she was not sure whether we were done.

I said we were done.

She said thank you, and she went into the fruit shop, with her hair as it was, and I could see her through the window paying for figs.

She was not defying me. That is the thing I would want understood. There was nothing in it. She had been reminded, she had been perfectly polite about being reminded, and then she went and bought figs, and the whole transaction had gone through cleanly and correctly and had left absolutely no mark on the world of any kind.

I gave her all four points. In order, in the sun, outside a fruit shop, to a woman who was buying figs.

I did not have to.

36.

NO NAME. VEHICLE STOP, HER OWN CAR, HER OWN PLATE. THE MESSAGE ARRIVED WHILE SHE WAS WRITING.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

His name is Reza and he was on my intake and he is in records now, and I had not spoken to him in six years.

There was not much to explain. That is one of the things about twelve years: there is a way of asking that does not put anything on paper and does not make anybody a party to anything, and he understood it inside a sentence.

He said: is it your brother.

I said yes.

He said: is he in something.

I said no. And that is true, and it has been true the whole time, and it is the flattest fact in this entire account. Mehdi has never been in anything. He was twenty-four and he was at a thing on a street in 1391 and it lasted an afternoon and he was not even at the front of it, and it was not the year anybody remembers, and he was let out in nine days and he has been selling parts ever since.

Reza said he would look. He said it might take a while. He said do not come to the building.

Then he said: Zeynab. You know I can only tell you what it says.

I said I know.

He said a week on Sunday.

That was the eighteenth of Mordad, a Saturday. The Sunday he meant is the twenty-sixth.

I have eight days.

37.

NO STOPS. NO FORMS. THE FOLDER WENT BACK IN THE TRAY EMPTY.

—

I went in on my day off.

Not for the file. There is nothing to do about the file until Sunday and I know it. I went in because it was Friday and because I have been getting up at half past five since Khordad and my body does not know what Friday is any more.

The building on a Friday has three people in it and one of them is downstairs and two of them are somewhere else. I went up to the room with the map.

I have been in that room every Sunday morning for twelve years and I have never been in it alone. It is not a large room. There is the table, there are the chairs, there is the board, and there is the map on the long wall, and I went and stood in front of the map, close, the way you do not stand in front of it when there are people behind you.

It is a district map. It is printed. It has the main streets and the metro and the parks and it has a fold across the middle from when it lived somewhere else. There is a tea ring on Nezam-Abad that has been there longer than I have.

There is nothing on it. There are no pins. There is nothing marked, nothing drawn, no shading, no numbers, nothing at all. It is a map you could buy.

And every Sunday for twelve years, when he says the number, all three of us turn and look at it for four or five seconds.

I stood there for a long time. I could not tell you how long.

Then I went down and out past the man on the desk, who said *khasteh nabāshid* [khas-TEH na-baa-SHEED], may you not be tired, because that is what you say, and I said it back to him, and I got the bus.

38.

NAHID R., 27. HER OWN HAND. I HAVE PUT IT AT THE END OF THIS PART BECAUSE IT WAS THE LAST ONE.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

Nahid R. is the last undertaking I took before Sunday and I did not know it at the time, which is how it always is.

She was twenty-seven and she was on Motahhari at ten past nine in the morning with a scarf around her neck, and she was a *dekor*, and she was polite, and it took nine minutes. She wrote it. She got to *and that this will not be repeated* and she put the pen down and she pushed the sheet across the desk to me and turned it round the right way for me to read, which almost nobody does.

Then she said: does this work?

Not angry. Not clever. She was asking me the way you ask a chemist whether the drops are any good.

And I have had that question put to me perhaps thirty times in twelve years and I have always given point three, which has a phrasing that sounds like advice, and it takes about nine seconds and it closes the conversation and it has never once failed.

I gave her point three.

She said all right, and she took her card back, and she waited to be collected, and her flatmate came with a coat inside the hour, and she went.

That is not a story. Nothing happened in it.

What I want down is that I gave her point three at ten past nine on the twenty-fifth of Mordad, and I gave it well, and I meant it, and I believed it, and it was the last time.

IV. A STAYER

39.

SUNDAY, THE TWENTY-SIXTH OF MORDAD. NO STOP. NO FORM.

—

He did not want to meet near either building so we met at a place on Somayyeh with a window on the street, and he had got there first and had ordered for both of us, which I noticed.

He had it on a piece of paper. Not a photograph, not a print — his own handwriting, four lines, which he had copied out and folded twice.

He put it on the table and turned it round for me.

There is a file number. There is my brother's name and my father's name and a date of birth that is right. There is the section and there is the year.

And there is a word, and the word is *makhtumeh* [makh-too-MEH], which means concluded — a thing that has been closed and settled and cannot be reopened by anybody, and which is not the same as *asleep*, and which is not the same as anything, because it is the end of a road and there is nothing behind it.

And beside the word there is a date.

The date is the ninth of Esfand 1391.

I sat and looked at it and Reza did not say anything, and outside the window a man was doing something to a motorcycle with his foot.

I sat the test in Ordibehesht 1392.

That is fourteen months.

No. That is not right, and I have been getting it wrong all week, and I am going to get it right here. Esfand 1391 to Ordibehesht 1392 is not fourteen months. It is about two.

It was closed two months before I was hired.

40.

**THE SAME EVENING. I TOOK NOTHING AND I WROTE
NOTHING.**

—

I want to put down what I did that evening because I have read things where a person finds something out and the next paragraph is a month later, and it was not like that.

I thanked Reza. I thanked him properly, twice. He said not to. He said I had done something for him in 1396 and he had never liked owing it, and now he did not owe it, and he said that plainly and without any warmth in it at all, and I understood that the account was closed and that I should not come again.

He asked if I was all right and I said yes.

He said, for what it is worth, that a *makhtumeh* from that year for that section would have been an ordinary clearing. That there were a great many of them. That somebody went through and closed everything from 1391 that had nothing in it, and it took months, and it was three men and a room.

He said: it was not about him. Nobody sat down and decided about your brother.

I said I know.

I took the bus. I got off two stops early because I wanted the walk and then regretted it because it was still thirty-four degrees at eight in the evening.

I went in. I put the light on. I made rice, because there was rice, and I ate it standing at the counter out of the pan, which I do, and I washed the pan.

Then I sat down and I did not do anything at all for a period of time that I would put at two hours and could not swear to.

I was not crying and I was not thinking. I was doing the thing where you are waiting for something to arrive, and it does not, and you keep waiting because there is no other suggestion. At some point I got up and set the alarm for half past five, because Monday.

41.

NO DATE ON THIS ONE. I AM NOT GOING TO PUT ONE.

—
Grey jacket. No tie. Folder under the left arm. Half past ten in the morning, the stone stairs at the end of the upper corridor, Ordibehesht 1392.

Now put it back where it goes.

The file had been closed for two months. It was closed by three men in a room going through 1391 and shutting everything that was empty. Nobody in that building had a thought about my brother in Ordibehesht 1392 and nobody has had one since.

So what was the man on the stairs saying?

He may have been saying what was true. *Your brother's file is asleep. Nobody has any reason to wake it.* It was true, and it was more true than he can have known, and a man who says a true thing to a frightened woman on a staircase is doing the ordinary decent thing and thinking about his lunch.

That reading has been available for twelve years and I did not take it down off the shelf once.

I am not able to tell you it is the right one. I am able to tell you it fits, which is all I have been able to say about any version of it since Sunday.

He knew my name because he had it in the folder. Everybody who was on that list was in that folder and he had been reading it upstairs and he came down the stairs with it under his arm, and he passed a woman in a corridor and said the reassuring thing you say, the way you say *it will be fine*, the way you say *don't worry about it*, the way you say *come to us any time, the house is yours* — and then he went down the stairs and got in a car and that was the end of it for him, that afternoon, forever. He was not making an offer.

There was nothing to accept.

42.

STILL NOTHING. I DID THE SUMS ON THE BACK OF A FORM.

—

We have a word for it and every child in that country has the word by the time they are six.

Ta'ārof [ta-aa-ROF]. The offering that is not meant. You say *the house is yours*. You say *come and stay with us, let me pay, take it, take it, I have another one*. The other person says no. You insist. They say no. Nobody takes the house. Nobody takes the money. It is the water everybody swims in and there is nothing dishonest in it, because both of you know, and because knowing is the whole system.

It goes wrong exactly once in a person's life and this was mine.

He offered me something in the way people offer things, meaning nothing, expecting nothing, having already forgotten by the bottom of the stairs.

And I said yes.

I have done the arithmetic nine times this week and it will not come out, and I am going to put down why, because the why turns out to be the answer.

Twelve years. Two hundred and eighty working days a year, which is generous to me. But the number a day is not a number. In my fifth year it was twelve before lunch and this Mordad it was two, and in between it was everything, and I do not have the years written down anywhere. The forms are in a tray. The tray went upstairs. There is no book anywhere with my name on it and a total at the bottom.

So I get twelve thousand one way and twenty the other and I have decided to say fifteen, because I have to say something, and because a person who cannot say how many is a person who has arranged not to know.

Fifteen thousand.

Fifteen thousand women stopped in a street and taken to a room and made to write a sentence that somebody else composed, because a man with a folder under his arm was polite to me on a staircase for nine seconds and I took it literally.

I did not have to work it out.

Every single one of them. Not most. Not the bad ones, not the arguments, not the ones I have gone over since. All of them, including Sahar with her scarf in her hand like a bag of bread, and Nahid who turned the page round the right way for me to read, and the girl on the bench for six hours in Mordad.

I have never once been paid in anything. There was nothing to be paid in. The file was shut before I walked into the building.

43.

THE FIRST WEEK OF SHAHRIVAR. IN A CORRIDOR, AND HE DID NOT KNOW I WAS THERE.

—

I heard it in the first week of Shahrivar, upstairs, in the corridor outside the room with the map, and it was not about me and it was not to me and the man who said it does not know I exist.

There were two of them and one was from the district and one was from somewhere else, and they were talking about the vehicle allocation for next year, which is the only conversation that has ever taken place in that building.

And the one from somewhere else said, about the whole business — the vans, the unit, the thing itself:

It's belā-mowzu' now anyway.

Belā-mowzu' [be-laa-mow-ZOO]. Without a subject. It is what you say about a thing that has not been defeated and has not been abolished and has not been argued with — a thing that has simply stopped having anything to be about. A question that nobody needs the answer to any more. A dispute where the item under dispute has gone.

He said it the way you say *it's August*.

The other one said something about the vehicles.

They went into the room.

I stood in that corridor for a while and then I went down and out and sat on the wall by the car park in the sun, which is not a thing I do.

Ten days. In Mordad I found out that the twelve years were not for anything. In Shahrivar I found out that the job the twelve years were spent on has, separately and for entirely unconnected reasons and without anybody deciding it, stopped existing.

The second one is not about me at all. That is what I keep coming back to. It did not happen to me. It happened, and I was standing there.

44.

AN EVENING IN SHAHRIVAR. THE ROOM WITH THE BENCH.

—

I stayed late one evening in Shahrivar because there was no reason to go home and I have got out of the habit of being in a flat at seven o'clock.

Everybody went. Zohreh went at six. The man on the desk downstairs changed. The building does that thing buildings do in the evening where the sound goes out of it in stages.

And I went into the room and I sat on the bench.

I did not decide to. I came in to get the folder and the folder was not there and I sat down.

You sit forward. Everybody sits forward, and I have watched several hundred women do it and I always thought it was fear, and it is not fear. It is that the bench is against the wall and the wall is cold and the room is hot, and if you sit back you are cold and if you sit forward you are hot, and forward is the one you pick.

Hands together, because there is nothing to do with them.

And you look at the door, because the whole of it is that somebody has to come and get you, and you are not going anywhere until they do, and there is not one single thing you can do to make it faster.

Nobody was coming for me. Nobody was going to.

Not because there was any trouble. Because there is no procedure. I am not detained and I have not been stopped and nothing has happened to me at all, and there is no form anywhere in that building for a woman of thirty-eight sitting on the wrong side of a room at nine o'clock at night.

Moondani. A stayer. The one nobody comes for.

We have said that word in that doorway a hundred times and I have laughed at it every time, and Hassan-agma stretches the second syllable, which for some reason is funnier.

It is funnier. It is a good word. It is a very good word and it did its job for twelve years and it did it on me in about four seconds.

I did not have to sit down.

45.

THE END OF SHAHRIVAR. THE SHOP. NO STOP, NO FORM, AND NOTHING SAID.

—

I went back to the shop at the end of Shahrivar.

He was not on the ladder. He was at the counter doing the book, and he looked up and saw it was me and I watched him decide to be all right about it, which took him about a second and which he has been doing since he was nineteen.

I had the sentence.

I have had it for twelve years and it had never been so ready. *Mehdi, I have to tell you something. I did this because of you. In 1392 a man on a staircase told me your file was asleep and that nobody had any reason to wake it, and I took it as a bargain, and I have kept my end of it every day since, and last month I found out there was never anything there.*

Four seconds. Perhaps five.

And I stood in my brother's shop and understood that it is now a worse thing to say than it was on Friday.

Because in Mordad it was a terrible reason. Now it is not a reason. In Mordad I could have handed him something heavy and let him decide what to do with it — he might have been angry, he might have said I was a fool, but there would have been a thing in the room with a shape.

Now there is nothing to hand him. I would be telling my brother that I gave twelve years to a mistake I made in a corridor, and he would have to stand there behind his own counter and find something to say to that, and there is nothing to say to it, and I would have made him hold it.

I have spent twelve years not telling him to protect myself.

I did not tell him on Wednesday to protect him, and I want it written down that I know the difference, and that the second one is not better and I am not going to pretend it is.

He asked if I wanted tea. I said no, I was passing.

He said: you're always passing.

He said it lightly. He was making a joke. It is the first joke he has made to me in about six years and I could not do anything with it, and I stood there, and the moment went by, and then a man came in about a fuel filter.

46.

**A NIGHT AT THE END OF SHAHRIVAR. I DID IT AT THE
TABLE, WITH THE LIGHT ON.**

—

Here is what I did that night, and I have thought about how to write it and there is no way of writing it that makes it look like anything other than what it is.

I put it back.

I sat at the table with the light on and I went through it properly, the way you go through a bill you think is wrong, and I laid it out.

One. If the man on the stairs meant nothing, then there is no arrangement and there never was, and I am simply a woman who did this. Fifteen thousand of them, of my own free will, for eighteen million tomān a month.

Two. If the man on the stairs meant something, then I was paying, and it was for my brother, and it was the only thing I could do, and I did it.

Three. There is no way to find out which. The file is *makhtumeh* and the date is what it is, but a file can be closed and a man can still have meant it, and a man can have meant nothing and the file could have opened anyway. Reza cannot tell me. Nobody can tell me. The man on the stairs does not remember me and I would not know him in the street.

Four. Therefore it is not a question of fact. It is a question of which one I hold.

And I sat there and I chose.

I am not going to dress it up. It took most of the night and at the end of it I had put the sentence back in the place it has been for twelve years, with the small lift on *reason*, which makes it a hint, and I have kept it there since, and it holds.

It holds perfectly. That is the part I did not expect. I thought a thing you have taken apart on a table stays apart. It does not. It went back together and it does not rattle, and in the morning it was simply true again, the way it has been true every morning since 1392.

I know exactly what I have done. That is not a comfort and it does not stop it working.

I did not have to choose the second one.

47.

**A THURSDAY MORNING, BEFORE SIX. THE MIRROR.
NOTHING TO WRITE.**

—

I have a mirror in the bathroom and it is above the basin and it is too low for me, so to see the top of my head I have to come up on my toes.

On the Thursday morning I stood in front of it at ten to six with the scarf in my hand.

I was going to look at it. That was the whole of the plan. Take it off — it was already off — and stand there and look at my own head the way I have looked at fifteen thousand others, and see what is actually there.

I got as far as coming up on my toes.

There is a line and there is a gap above it and the gap is the offence, and I have known that in my hands since I was twenty-six, and for twelve years I have been able to arrive at it from across a road in under a second.

And I could not do it to myself. Not would not. Could not. I came up on my toes and my eyes went to my own eyes, which is what eyes do, and I brought them up again and they went back down again, and I did that four or five times and then I put the scarf on and went to work.

I am thirty-eight years old.

I have never once looked at the top of my own head as anything but a violation, and it turns out that when the equipment is pointed the other way it does not fire, and I do not know what my hairline looks like, and I am not going to find out.

That is not remorse. I want to be clear, because it would be very easy to write that down and let it stand for remorse and be finished.

It is only that the thing works in one direction. That is all it is. It is a tool and it points away from you and it always did.

48.

**NO STOP YET. THE FOLDER IS ON MY KNEES. SIX BLANK
FORMS IN IT, WHICH IS WHAT I DREW.**

—

The van went out on the Thursday at half past eight, and I was in it, in the seat I have sat in for twelve years, with the folder on my knees.

Zohreh was late and came in with her water and her cloth in the bag.

Hassan-agma had the door open and one foot on the kerb.

The supervisor has not said a number since the middle of Tir, and I do not think he is going to say one again, and the map is still on the wall.

Nobody has told us anything. There has been no announcement about the unit and no meeting about the vans and no letter, and the young man with the laptop has not come back, and there is nothing in writing anywhere saying that any of this is over.

I stopped going in at seven in Shahrivar. Nobody noticed that either.

We go out at half past eight and we come in at six.

I have thought about whether I should stop, and I want to put down what I concluded, because it is not what I would have said in Ordibehesht.

If I stop, I have to be a person who did this for twelve years and then stopped, and that person has to explain the twelve years. There is nobody to explain them to except me and I would have the rest of my life to do it in.

If I do not stop, I am a woman who is at work.

It is thirty-one degrees at half past eight and it will be forty-three by two, and the air conditioning was written up in Bahman and again in Farvardin and there is a form for that too.

49.

ZEYNAB MORADI, 38. MY OWN HAND. THE WORDING IS NOT MINE.

I undertake that in future I will observe the Islamic covering in public and that this will not be repeated.

The last one I am going to write down happened on Motahhari at twenty past ten on the Thursday and it took about six seconds.

She was perhaps thirty. She had no scarf at all — not in her hand, not on her shoulders, not in her bag as far as I could see — and she was walking east with a paper bag under her arm and a telephone in the other hand, and she was reading it as she walked, the way everybody does now, at the speed everybody does it.

I got out. I did the angle, from the side, the way Hassan-agma says, which I have never once admitted to him that I started doing.

I said the first line. It is the first line of point one and I have said it fifteen thousand times and there is nothing wrong with the way I said it.

And she kept walking.

I want to be exact about this because it is the only thing in this whole account that I have not been able to put anywhere.

She was not defiant. She did not tell me to go away, she did not swear at me, she did not film me, she did not walk faster. She did not look up from the telephone. There was no decision in it at all.

I do not think she heard a person. I think she heard a sound on a pavement in Tehran at twenty past ten in the morning, at the volume of a scooter or a man selling something, and it did not reach the part of her that stops.

And she went past me and on down Motahhari with the bag under her arm and I stood there and watched the back of her head until the corner, and I could not tell you one single thing about her face.

Then I got back in the van, and Zohreh said nothing because there was nothing to say, and Hassan-agma pulled out, and we went up towards Shariati where there is shade behind the mosque, and I put the folder on my knees.

There are six forms in it.

GLOSSARY

Āghā [aa-GHAA] — Persian, sir, mister. An honorific stuck on the end of a first name. In ordinary use it means almost nothing; its absence means a great deal.

Bad-hejābi [bad-he-jaa-BEE] — Persian, improper covering. The single official offence. It covers a woman with her whole head bare and a woman whose scarf moved in a wind, which is why nobody uses it except when speaking upwards.

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

Belā-mowzu' [be-laa-mow-ZOO] — Persian via Arabic, without a subject. Said of a matter that has not been settled or defeated or abolished, but has simply stopped having anything to be about.

Chādor [chaa-DOR] — Persian, tent. The full cloak, one piece, no fastening, held closed by hand.

Chashm [CHASHM] — Persian, eye. Said in answer to an instruction: on my eye — yes, of course, at once.

Dekor [de-KOR] — from the French *décor*. Van slang: a scarf that is present and doing no work.

Do khiyābun [do kheey-yaa-BOON] — Persian, two streets. Van slang: a woman who fixes it while you watch and puts it back two streets later.

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

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

Fizik [fee-ZEEK] — from the French, physics. Van slang: a scarf held up by a single clip against all reason.

Gasht-e ershād [GASHT-e er-SHAAD] — Persian, guidance patrol. The police formation that enforces the covering regulations in the street.

Hamkarān [ham-kaa-RAAN] — Persian, colleagues. Plural of hamkār. Said to a room by somebody who does not work in it.

Khānom [khaa-NOM] — Persian, lady, madam. The ordinary polite form of address to a woman, and what an officer says before anything else.

Khasteh nabāshid [khas-TEH na-baa-SHEED] — Persian, may you not be tired. Said to anybody at work, arriving or leaving, by everybody, all day.

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

Makhtumeh [makh-too-MEH] — Arabic via Persian, concluded, sealed. The stamp that closes a file for good, carrying the authority of a settled matter.

Moondan [moon-DAN] — Persian, to stay. The colloquial form of māndan.

Moondani [moon-da-NEE] — Persian, one who stays. Van slang for a detained woman nobody comes to collect.

Mordad [mor-DAAD] — The fifth month, late July to late August; the hottest.

Nāzer [naa-ZER] — Persian via Arabic, observer; overseer. Both meanings are live: the one who watches, and the one who signs a thing off. A police reporting application carries the name.

Nowrūz [now-ROOZ] — Persian, new day. The spring equinox, and the new year.

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

Parvandeḥ [par-van-DEH] — Persian, file, case. Van slang, of a woman who is going to argue and be right.

Shahrivar [shah-ree-VAR] — The sixth month, late August to late September.

Ta'ahhod [ta-ah-HOD] — Arabic via Persian, undertaking, pledge.

A written promise not to repeat the offence, made in the subject's own hand with the wording dictated to her.

Ta'ārof [ta-aa-ROF] — Arabic via Persian, courtesy. The offering that is not meant, understood by both parties not to be meant, and made a thousand times a day.

Tazakkor [ta-zak-KOR] — Arabic via Persian, reminder. The verbal warning, and the first rung of the tariff.

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

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

Zerang [ze-RANG] — Persian, sharp, clever. Not a compliment.

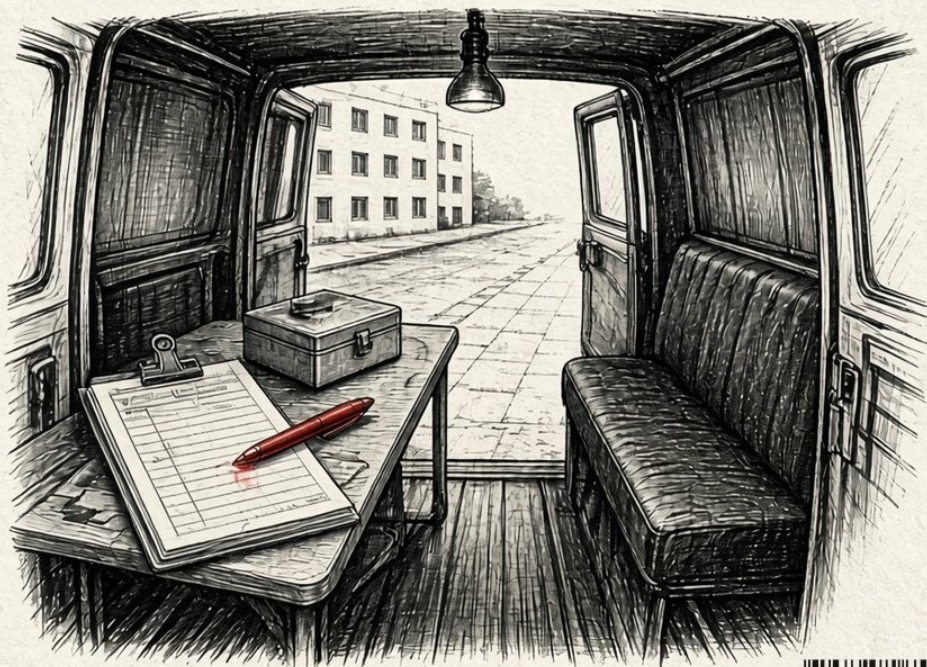
Zeynab Moradi has been in the van for twelve years. She makes the approach, she gives the talk, and she stands over a woman while the woman writes a sentence in her own hand that somebody else composed. There is a form for it. There is a form for everything.

She does it because of nine seconds in a corridor, when a man she has never seen since told her that her brother's file was asleep and that nobody had any reason to wake it. She took it as an offer. Nobody has mentioned it since. She cannot test it, because testing it means stopping.

Then the application arrives. It never gets tired and it never has a bad day, and it does in one morning what the van does in a month. Her numbers fall. She starts coming in at seven. And there is less on the pavements to find every week, because the women have simply stopped — without a leader, without a name, and without asking anyone.

In the last week of Mordad she finds out what the nine seconds were worth.

There is no form for a woman sitting on the wrong side of the room.



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