

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 90

THE ONLY ONE WHO KNOWS

تنها کسی که می داند

C H E W Z

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, organisations and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental. All persons and institutions appearing in this book are invented.

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دوم. عشق
سرزمین آتش و سوختن



اول. طلب
دشت خاک و آغاز راه



Synopsis

A woman rings at twenty past eight in the morning, which is not when she rings.

She was his wife for seven years. She has known exactly what he is since she recognised him across a rented hall in four seconds, and she has never once used the word, and she has been holding a single line for thirteen years so that their daughter would have a nothing instead of a something.

She says: *I need you in a court.*

And then: *It's Golnar's house.*

There is no crime in this book. A document exists, it is genuine, the signature is real and the debt was real — and what is false is a circumstance that nine or ten people understood in 1391 and nobody wrote down, because you do not ask your brother for a receipt. Every one of those people is dead or in Sweden.

Except one. And the one is a man with no papers in any name, wanted in three provinces, who obtained the information by telephone four years ago while impersonating a doctor, and who is the girl's father.

The Only One Who Knows is eleven months of corridors, one operating table, and one long administrative afternoon in Branch 4 with a house in it.

It is also the book in which he finds out where he came from — from an eighty-year-old clerk who hands it over while looking for something else in a drawer — and discovers that the coat he took off a chair in a hospital in 1404 was not a stranger's.

He tells nobody. He never will.

The Books Before This One

Every book in this series stands alone and they may be read in any order. This page is for readers who have not read the others, and gives away nothing that would spoil them.

No. 67 — Sayyid of Nowhere. A career burglar walks out of a hospital in Mashhad wearing a dead cleric's clothes, taken off a chair because nobody was watching the chair. He does not look at the colour of the turban. It is black, which means claimed descent from the Prophet. He gets off a bus in a salt town intending twelve days and stays fourteen months as custodian of its shrine, cannot read a word of Arabic, invents scripture, and is nearly caught weekly by a young seminarian called Mojtaba who ends up defending him. He leaves carrying one line from a 1357 pilgrim register, beside his mother's name, that he has not been able to put down.

No. 71 — A Steady Hand. He takes a bag off a luggage rack. Inside is a stethoscope and a Ministry of Health card, and a village of four hundred on a dying qanat has been promised a locum for eleven months. He stays fourteen weeks and cannot read a drug name. A nurse called Nasrin has been running that clinic alone and signing a broken doctor's name four hundred and eleven times. A woman lives who would not have. A boy of nine dies who might not have. And ninety feet underground, in bad air, something corrects him: *the fourth column is not for names.*

No. 74 — The Break Bell. The mountain pass shuts behind him and does not open for four months. Forty children across six grades, no teacher since autumn, and a man in the shop tired of carrying the keys. He cannot read, so he makes the children read to him instead. A retired schoolmaster of seventy-one turns out to have been one of the students sent into the villages with a notebook in the winter of 1357, and finally explains what the fourth column was for — and it changes nothing, because the answer does not transfer. There is also a boy of eleven called **Hamed** with a credit ledger in the back of his mathematics book.

No. 76 — The Airing. A driver goes to the wrong guesthouse and a wanted man walks into a provincial prison from the front, in daylight, with somebody holding the door. Nine days, and nobody

says no to him for any of them. It is the first coat that could do no good: an inspector can close a wing and end a career and cannot open one door. He writes a report that is true and unanswerable, and it fixes everything it was meant to fix and destroys the one decent man in the building.

No. 81 — *One Was, One Was Not.* A woman of seventy-four looks at his hands on a doorstep and decides he is her husband's brother, gone forty-three years. There is no institution this time and no document to contradict — a family is a story a number of people have agreed to, and it has never once been audited. Then a truck comes into the yard and **Hamed** gets down, seventeen now, running a fuel route under a name that is not his, and recognises him in a second and a half and says nothing for eleven days.

What he is carrying into this book: the name of a man he has been told is alive and not far away, on a folded page, with an instruction not to go straight there. A daughter who does not know who he is. A wife who does. And a debt to her that he was called on once, in Mordad of 1406, and did not pay.

The Seven Valleys

There is a Persian poem, written around 1177 by Farid ud-Din Attar of Neyshabur, in which all the birds of the world set out to find their king, the Simorgh. He lives beyond seven valleys. Before they go, each bird stands up and explains why it cannot.

Nader Fani has never read it. It has been told to him five times by five people, four of them wrong, and he has told it wrong himself. He does not know he is crossing anything.

The valleys, in order. **Talab**, the Quest — you set out without knowing what for. **Eshq**, Love — reason is abandoned and the cost stops mattering. **Marefat**, Knowledge — every traveller's road is his own and there is no general answer. **Estighna**, Detachment — the world's business goes weightless and nothing is owed. **Towhid**, Unity — the many are one. **Hayrat**, Bewilderment — you no longer know what you know. And **Faqr o Fana**, Poverty and Annihilation, where the self goes.

The birds so far. The nightingale, who will not go because he loves a rose. The owl, who will not leave the ruins because there is treasure buried under them. The hawk, who already sits on a king's wrist, hooded and fed by hand. The duck, who cannot leave the water because he is always in it and therefore always clean. And the parrot, who wants only the water of Khizr — not a king, simply more of this — and would rather keep his cage than cross a desert to find it.

To him the hoopoe says: a man who is willing to die can find that water. A man who only wants not to die will never get anywhere near it. You have mistaken your keeper for your life.

The Standing

My name is Nader Fani and I have been six men.

I am fifty. I have no passport, no bank account and no papers in my own name. I am wanted in three provinces under one name that is mine and five that are not. There is a book on a shelf in a building in Tehran with my birth in it, and everything I have done since 1997 has been an increasingly elaborate arrangement to avoid being in the same room as that book.

The first was a burglar, twenty-seven years, roofs and second-storey windows, Thursday nights only. Caught once. Of twelve years I served four.

The second was a sayyid, for fourteen months, in a coat off a chair in a hospital in Mashhad. I did not look at the colour.

The third was a doctor, for fourteen weeks, on a card out of a bag on a luggage rack. A woman lived. A boy of nine did not.

The fourth was a teacher, for four months in a gorge with the road shut, and it is the only one I would do again.

The fifth was an inspector, for nine days, and it is the only one that had power in it, and everything in my hand was negative.

The sixth was somebody's brother-in-law, for five months, in a house at a border, and I left it on my own decision, which I had never done before.

The people who are still in it.

Golnar, my daughter, twenty-three, married, in Tehran. She does not know. She thinks I am a cleric who signed a paper for her once and gave her the only answer about her father she has ever been able to use — which I invented in eleven minutes in a courtyard, and which was true, and which she has had on her telephone for four years.

Mahnaz Shokri, who was my wife for seven years and who has had the same name her whole life while I have had six. She knows. She has never once used the word. She raised our daughter for thirteen years without telling her one true thing about me, and it is the

largest single act of work by anybody in these accounts.

Hamed, twenty-one now, on a road somewhere with a licence in his own name, who was eleven when I taught him and seventeen when he worked me out, and who thinks well of me, and who is the only person alive who does.

Mojtaba, who is somewhere in his thirties, building a life on fourteen pages of an argument he made himself about a man who does not exist. He will find out. I knew that when I took him and I took him anyway.

What I am carrying. A folded page with a name on it written four times. An instruction not to go straight there, four years old and still obeyed. A debt to Mahnaz called once and not paid. A pair of shoes that came off a dead man in Mashhad and are half a size too big. And one line in a pilgrim register from Aban of 1357, beside my mother's name, in a fourth column that is not for names.

There is a poem about thirty birds who went a long way to find a king. I have not read it. There is a parrot in it who does not want the king at all — he wants the water that means a man does not die, and he would rather keep his cage than cross a desert to look for it.

I have been very good at not dying. I have called that a life.

A Note from the Author

There is no crime in this book, and that was the point of writing it.

A man signs a paper for his brother in 1391 because a sum has to go through a bank and one of them has the standing and the other does not. The paper is written as a debt, secured against a house, properly witnessed, because that is the only shape the language has. Fourteen months later the money comes back — in cash, in a car that changes hands, in two years of somebody's rent — and nobody writes any of that down, because you do not give your brother a receipt. Asking him for one is the insult. The paper you already made him sign was as far as it was possible to go.

Eighteen years later everyone who understood it is dead, and a son finds a document in his father's things, and does the only thing a reasonable person does.

Nobody in that court is a villain. The advocate on the other side is the best professional in the book. The judge is correct in every particular and rules the way any competent judge would rule on what is in front of him. And the whole machine, running exactly as designed, is about to take a house — because a document was written down and a truth was not.

I have spent five books enjoying that principle. A stamp is more real than a fact; an institution can only see the paper; and a man in the right clothes can walk through any door in this country because the door is checking the clothes. It is the engine of every one of these books and I have been very pleased with it.

This is the book where it points the other way, at somebody he loves, and he has to sit in a chair and watch it work.

A word on the oath, because readers outside Iran will assume it is a formality. It is not. Where the documents run out, our procedure allows the court to put the matter to a sworn statement, and that statement is not evidence toward a decision — it **is** the decision. And underneath the law there is something older: there are men in this country who have walked out of a courtroom and surrendered a house rather than swear, and everybody in the building understands what has happened when they do, and nobody thinks worse of them.

That is what an oath still means here, and it is why the middle of this book is a man in stolen clothes putting his hand on a Book and telling the entire truth.

The other thing this book is about is what happens when the alarm goes off.

Every human being carries a machine whose whole job is to keep the self intact — the thing that flinches, the thing that produces a defence before the accusation has finished. It runs so continuously that nobody has ever heard it, the way nobody has ever heard their own house. Under anaesthetic it stops, for about half an hour, and what is left is a man with all of his faculties and none of his interests.

I wanted to know what a man like this would find if he were made, once, briefly, incapable of defending himself — and my answer is that he would not find remorse. He would do a **survey**. He would go through his own life the way he has gone through six hundred buildings, room by room, with his hands behind his back, and he would come out the other side not with forgiveness but with a **sum**: nineteen years gone and about twenty left, and nineteen is not most of it.

That is not a redemption. It is arithmetic. And what he does with it makes everything worse, because the only door out of the room is the coat, and so the fraud stops being a crime and becomes a vocation, and he knows exactly what he is choosing while he chooses it.

He would want me to add that he never carried a weapon.

Chew Z

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PART ONE — THE CALL

Statements One to Eight

STATEMENT 1

What I am the only person alive to know

Lessons, notes, questions, findings, accounts.

These are statements, which is the word a court uses, and I have chosen it because everything in this one bends toward a room in which I said a true thing under a false name with my hand on a Book that says a man like me is going to hell.

I want to put the position at the front, because I am fifty and I have been six men and I have stopped seeing the point of arranging things.

I am the only person alive who knows where I came from.

I did not know that when this started. I found it out in the middle of it, from an old man looking for something else in a drawer, and it is the largest fact of my life, and I have never told one human being and I am not going to. Not my daughter. Not the boy. Not the woman who was my wife for seven years and who is the only person who has ever known what I am.

It goes at the end of this account and then it goes in a bag.

The other thing, and it is smaller and it is the one that changed everything:

Somewhere on a table in a hospital in Mashhad, with a needle in the back of my hand, I did the arithmetic on how much time is left and found out I had been doing it wrong for fifteen years.

That is the whole book. The rest is a house, a document, a court, and eleven offices.

STATEMENT 2

Twenty past eight in the morning

Mahnaz rang on the ninth of Tir at twenty past eight in the morning, which is not when she rings.

Three years and eleven months since Mordad of 1406. She named a date then — the eleventh — and a man called Davoud and a room and an hour and the coat, and I said yes in about a second and I have written about that, and then on the eleventh of Mordad I was four hundred kilometres away finishing nineteen pages that ended a decent man's working life, and I posted them, and I did not ring her.

She has never mentioned it. Not once in three years and eleven months. I understood by about the fourth month that this was not forgiveness, it was **bookkeeping**, and that it was not a debt she was going to argue about, it was a debt she was going to call.

She called it at twenty past eight on a Tuesday.

She said, "It's me."

I said I knew.

And she said: "I need you in a court."

Now.

I have had four seconds four times in five years — a bus driver, nine men in a square, four keys on a counter, a man saying *Aqa-ye bāzras* — and every one of them was somebody handing me a costume, and I took every one, and I have written a great deal about being a man who cannot decline.

This was not that.

This was a woman I was married to for seven years, on a telephone, in the morning, asking me for the second time in my life to do a specific thing on a specific day, and the first time she asked I did not do it.

I said, "Whose court?"

And she said a thing I did not expect at all, and it went through me like cold water, and I put my hand on a wall.

She said: "It's Golnar's house."

STATEMENT 3

There is no crime in this book

I am going to set out the matter properly and slowly, because it is not complicated and because everybody assumes a story like this must contain a crime, and there is no crime in it anywhere and that is the entire problem.

Farid's father died in 1398. He left a house in the town — not a large house, four rooms and a yard — and it went to Farid, who is his only son, and the transfer was done correctly and registered correctly and there has never been any question about it.

Farid's father had a brother. The uncle.

I know about that uncle. I want to say that at the front because it is going to matter and because I am not going to pretend I stumbled on it.

In Bahman of 1405, in a village on a dying qanat, wearing a doctor's identity card that belonged to a man I have never met, I rang a cleric I had spoken to once in a corridor and I asked him — in the way you ask, after four minutes of his knee and his mother and the tiles — whether a certain family in his district were people of good standing.

And he told me. Four minutes. Everything.

He said they were reliable, that the father had died of the heart in 1398, that the young man worked in the parts department of an agricultural machinery dealership, that there were two sisters, and that there was a slight embarrassment in the family about **an uncle and a loan**.

I wrote it in the notes on my telephone. *Farid. 26. Parts dept. 2 sisters. Father d. 2019, heart. Uncle — loan?*

I put my future son-in-law in my notes like a job. I have written about that too.

The uncle died in Esfand of 1409.

And his heirs — a son in Karaj and a daughter — went through what he had, as everybody does, and in it they found a document.

The document is real.

That is the thing. I want to say it four or five times in this account because every single person who has ever heard this story has waited for me to say that it was forged, and it was not forged, and if it had been forged none of the rest of this would have happened and I would never have got in the way of my daughter's life.

It is a private acknowledgement of debt, handwritten, signed by Farid's father in 1391, in favour of his brother, for a sum that in 1391 was a house and today is a car. It is properly witnessed by two men. The signature is his and nobody has ever disputed it.

And what it says, in the usual formula, is that the debt is secured against the property.

That is a charge. If a court accepts it, it attaches to the house, and the sum is adjusted, and the heirs are entitled, and Farid and Golnar either find money that does not exist or they sell.

There is no villain. The son in Karaj is not a villain; he found a paper in his dead father's things with his own family's name on it and did the only thing a reasonable person does, which is take it to a lawyer.

The lawyer is not a villain either. I met him. He is extremely good.

STATEMENT 4

You do not ask your brother for a receipt

Here is what is actually wrong with that document, and it is the reason this is a book and not a bill.

Everybody at the time knew it was not a debt.

In 1391 Farid's father needed to put a sum through a bank for something to do with the dealership, and he did not have the standing, and his brother did. So the brother's money went in and the paper was written the way papers of that kind are always written in this country — as a debt, secured, witnessed, in the correct formula — because that is the only shape the language has.

And within fourteen months the money came back. All of it. Not through a bank; in the way that money actually moves in a family, which is in cash and in kind and in a car that changed hands and in two years of somebody's rent.

Nobody wrote any of that down. **Nobody has ever written any of that down in the history of this country.** You do not give your brother a receipt. Asking your brother for a receipt is the insult; the paper you already made him sign was as far as it was possible to go without it becoming a thing between you.

The two witnesses: one died in 1401 and one is in Sweden and will not sign anything.

Farid's father died in 1398.

The uncle knew. Obviously the uncle knew — the uncle knew for eighteen years and never mentioned that paper to anybody, because to him it was not a thing that existed any more, it was an old piece of paper in a folder about a matter that was closed.

And then he died, and his son found it, and to his son it is not eighteen years of two brothers. It is a document.

So the entire matter comes down to this: **there is a fact that nine or ten people knew, that no piece of paper anywhere in the world records, and every one of those people is dead or in Sweden.**

Except one.

And the one is a man who has no papers in any name, who is wanted in three provinces, who acquired the information by telephone in Bahman of 1405 while impersonating a doctor, and who is the girl's father.

Mahnaz said, on the telephone, at twenty past eight in the morning: "You know about the uncle."

I said, "How do you know I know about the uncle?"

And she said, "Because you would have looked."

Fifteen years divorced, and she is the only person on this earth who has ever known what I am, and she has known it since before I did.

STATEMENT 5

She has had the same name her whole life

I went to Tehran on the eleventh and met her in a place near Vanak, and it was the first time I had been in a room with Mahnaz Shokri [mah-NAAZ shok-REE] with nothing on my head since 2010.

I want to say something about the name.

She has always been Shokri. Women in this country do not take a husband's name and never have; it is not a modern thing and it is not a divorce thing. She was Shokri when I married her at twenty-four and she was Shokri for the seven years and she is Shokri now, and in fifteen years it had never once struck me as strange until I sat down opposite her in a place near Vanak and understood that **she has had the same name her whole life and I have had six.**

Golnar is Fani. That is how the registration works: the child takes the father. My daughter has carried my name since the day she was born and has never had any say in it, and it is the reason she had to walk into a shrine in a salt town four years ago with a plastic folder to get a court to declare me absent — because she could not marry without the permission of a man called Fani, and there was only one of those.

Mahnaz ordered. She did not ask me what I wanted; she has never once in her life asked me what I wanted in a restaurant and she is always right.

Then she put a folder on the table.

It was assembled properly. The deed, the transfer from 1398, the death certificate, the acknowledgement of debt in a photocopy, the letter from the son's lawyer, and — on the top, because she is who she is — a single page in her own handwriting listing what she knew and what she did not, in two columns.

I said, "How long have you had this?"

She said, "Nine weeks."

I said, "And you rang me on the ninth of Tir."

And she said, "I rang you when I had run out of other things."

I want that in the record because everybody who hears this assumes she reached for me. She did not reach for me. She spent nine weeks going through every legitimate route that exists in this country, and there is a list of them in that folder with things crossed off, and when the list was finished she rang the only asset she had left, which is a man who does not legally exist and who owes her.

Then she said: "You'll have to be him."

Not *the cleric*. Not *the sayyid*. **Him.**

Because she has known since a rented hall in Bahman of 1405 exactly what I am, and she has never once used the word, and she was not going to start in a restaurant near Vanak.

STATEMENT 6

An absence is lighter than you are

I asked her the question I had been carrying up the stairs for four years, and she answered it, and I have not recovered.

I said, "Why didn't you ever tell her?"

Meaning Golnar. Meaning thirteen years of a girl growing up with a hole in the shape of a man and a mother who never once, not in one bad night in thirteen years, said *your father is a thief and he is in Vakilabad and here is the address*.

I had a theory. I have had it since 2010 and I have been quietly warmed by it for fifteen years and it is in one of these books, and the theory was: **she protected me**.

Mahnaz put down her glass.

And she said, "That is what you think?"

I said it was.

And she said: "I did not tell her because the day I told her she would have had a father who was a thief. And I would have had to watch her decide what to do about that, at eleven, and at fourteen, and at seventeen. And she would have done something. She is your daughter, she does not leave things. She would have written, or gone, or found out where you were, and it would have cost her about six years."

She turned the glass round.

"It was not for you. There has never been a single thing I have done that was for you. It was so that she would have a **nothing** instead of a **something**, because a nothing you can walk past and a something you have to deal with."

Then she said the sentence, and it is the only sentence in six books that I have not been able to look at directly:

"I gave her an absence because an absence is lighter than you are."

I did not say anything for a while.

She let me not say anything, which she has always been extremely good at, and then she said, "Eat something, it's going cold," which is

what her mother says and what my mother said and what every woman in this country says at the exact moment a man cannot swallow.

Thirteen years. One line held, every day, without one lapse, against a child who asked and asked and asked.

I have worn six coats in five years and I have been very pleased with myself about the difficulty of it.

STATEMENT 7

Her price, named in a car park in eleven seconds

Here is her price, and she named it in the car park, standing up, in about eleven seconds, and it is the hardest thing anybody has ever asked me for.

She said: "When it's finished, you go, and you don't come back, and you don't ring her."

I said nothing.

"You'll want to," she said. "That is the whole of what I am worried about. You will do this and it will work and she will be grateful and you will find that you want to be useful again, and there will be another thing, because there is always another thing, and in four years she will have a person in her life who telephones."

I said that did not sound like a catastrophe.

And Mahnaz Shokri said:

"It is not a catastrophe. It is a **man in her life who is not her father, doing the things her father would do, forever, under a name that is not his.** And one day something will happen — you will be arrested, or you will die, or somebody will look at you properly — and she will find out that the person she rang for eleven years was you. And she will lose two people at once. She will lose him and she will lose the version of him. And she will be thirty-five."

Then she said, "I have already done that arithmetic. That is my job. It has been my job for thirteen years."

And she got in the car.

I want to record that she is correct. I have had four years to find the hole in it and there is no hole in it. Every part of that is true and she is the only person who has done the sum properly.

And I want to record, in the same paragraph, because it is the honest place for it:

I agreed, and I have not kept it.

STATEMENT 8

She rang the shrine

Golnar rang the shrine.

Not me — the shrine. The shrine at Emamzadeh Nur in Shurabad, where I was the custodian for fourteen months and where she came in 1405 with a plastic folder asking for the sayyid who signs things.

She rang because she keeps everything. She is a girl who has been to eleven offices and she keeps every document she has ever been given, and the statement I wrote for her in my own hand on shrine paper — the one certifying that no trace could be found of a man called Nader Fani — has a stamp on it, and under the stamp, as you do, the shrine's telephone number.

They gave her a number. It went two steps and arrived.

And she said: "Haj Aqa? It's Golnar. Golnar Fani. You signed a paper for me. About my father."

I said I remembered.

She said, "You always say that."

Now.

I have written about the first time she rang me. I was at the side of a road outside a town I do not name, in Farvardin of 1406, and she asked me to a family celebration and said she wanted one person there who knew the whole of it, and I said I would try to come.

Four years. She is twenty-three. And what has happened to her voice in four years is what happens to everybody's: it has got faster and slightly harder and there is an efficiency in it that was not there, and she got to the point in about ninety seconds, which at nineteen would have taken her four minutes.

She said there was a thing with the house. She said her mother was dealing with it. She said she did not want to bother me and then bothered me for eleven minutes, correctly and clearly, with the dates in the right order.

Then she said, "The reason I'm ringing is that there's going to be a hearing, and they've said it might come down to a sworn statement, and I don't know what that means, and everybody keeps telling me

it's fine."

And I said it was a serious thing and that people should stop telling her it was fine.

There was a small pause on the telephone.

And she said, "Thank you. Nobody has said that."

And then she said the other thing, and I had my hand flat on a table:

"Also — I've still got what you told me. The thing about the wall. I've read it about a hundred times and I want to ask you something about it, but not now, not on the phone."

I said all right.

She said, "Are you going to be at the hearing?"

And I said yes.

And she said, "Really?"

And I said, "Really" — which is what I said to her four years ago at the side of a road, and she made the same small noise she made then, one syllable out of the nose, entirely with pleasure, and I have heard that noise twice in my life and both times I was lying to her.

PART TWO — THE OFFICES

Statements Nine to Seventeen

STATEMENT 9

Eleven offices again, and she is good at it now

She has been to eleven offices again.

I want to write that down twice. Four years ago a girl of nineteen came into a shrine in a salt town with a plastic wallet and told me she had been to eleven offices in five weeks, and I invented an entire canonical procedure on the spot to keep her in that town for six weeks, and she thanked me for it.

She is twenty-three and she has been to eleven offices again, and this time she is good at it, and watching a person get good at that is one of the saddest things I have ever seen.

Here is what four years does.

At nineteen she arrived at a counter with everything in one plastic wallet and produced it in the order she was asked for it.

At twenty-three she arrives with **three folders**, colour-coded, and a page at the front of each listing what is in it, and she puts the correct one on the counter and leaves the other two in her bag, because she has learned that a clerk who sees three folders decides you are a difficult person and a clerk who sees one decides you are organised.

At nineteen she said please and thank you.

At twenty-three she says the man's name. She looks at the little plastic thing on his desk and she uses his name in the second sentence, and she asks him something small about his own department that only somebody who has been in eleven offices would know to ask, and she watches him become a person who is going to help her.

That is my mother's trick. That is the only inheritance in this account and I have written about it in every one of these books, and she has it, and nobody taught her.

She got it out of thirteen years of being a girl with a piece of paperwork where a father should be.

I stood in a corridor in Tehran and watched my daughter do the thing I do, and I have never once been able to decide whether to be proud of that, and I have stopped trying.

STATEMENT 10

The corridor

The corridor.

I want to give you the corridor properly, because everybody thinks the story of a lawsuit in this country happens in a court and it does not, it happens in about nine corridors over four months, and by the time you get to the court the thing is already decided and everyone in the room knows it.

Third floor. Benches on both sides, the moulded plastic kind, bolted in threes. A window at the end that does not open. A machine that has never had tea in it. Perhaps forty people on any given morning and every single one of them is having the worst month of their year.

You wait. That is the content. You wait, and while you wait you learn everybody's business, because there is nothing else to do and because after ninety minutes on a bolted bench a person will tell a stranger anything.

I have never been anywhere in my life where I was more useful.

I want to be honest about that. Four books ago I said that the waiting room of a village clinic is the only room in a village where a person can say something out loud to somebody not related to them, and I was right, and this is the same room with worse lighting. In four months in that corridor I:

— told a woman of about sixty that the letter she was holding was not a summons and did not require an answer, which she had believed for eleven days;

— explained to a man what *ejraiye*h means, which is the single most frightening word in the Iranian language if nobody has explained it to you;

— sat with a boy of twenty-five for two hours while he waited to find out about his brother, and I said perhaps nine words in two hours, and at the end he took my hand in both of his;

— and told four separate people, in four separate weeks, to stop bringing everything and start bringing one folder.

In a black turban. Which is why they let me.

Golnar said, in about the sixth week, "Everybody in this corridor knows you."

I said it was a long corridor.

And she said, "You've been coming with me for six weeks. You don't have to."

And I said something. I do not remember what I said. I remember exactly what I was doing with my hands.

STATEMENT 11

Farid says thank you properly, twice

Farid says thank you properly, twice, and I want a chapter for it because it is the thing that has undone me most in six books and it is not dramatic at all.

He is thirty. He sells agricultural machinery parts and he is good at it and he has a small, entirely genuine enthusiasm about a particular kind of bearing that I have now heard about on four occasions and would happily hear again.

He is out of his depth. Completely. This is a man who has never been in a legal matter in his life and who has discovered at thirty that a piece of paper his father signed when Farid was eleven can take the house, and he has spent nine months being **frightened and polite**, which is the specific condition of the decent man in this country and I have watched a great many of them in it.

He said thank you twice.

The first time was in the corridor in the fourth week, after I had done nothing at all except sit there, and he said it as we were leaving, in the ordinary way, and then he stopped and turned round and said it again properly — *Haj Aqa, thank you* — with his hand on his chest, because he had realised that the first one had been a reflex and he did not want it to be a reflex.

That is the whole of the man in one gesture.

The second time was in Aban, outside, and it is the one I cannot put down.

He said: "You didn't have to do any of this. You don't know us."

And I said something about the shrine and the paper and the customary period, which is a lie I invented in eleven minutes four years ago and which has now been load-bearing in this family for so long that it has stopped being a lie and become a **fact about their history**.

And he said: "Still. She's got nobody on that side. That's the thing. She's got her mother and that's it, and I've got a mother and two sisters and an entire — you know. And she never says anything about it."

Then he said, "So. Thank you."

I have been thanked in five books by people I was deceiving. A woman for a kitchen. A village for a heater. A boy for a window I do not remember saying anything about.

Nobody has ever thanked me for standing next to my own daughter.

STATEMENT 12

So why has it stopped?

She asked me the thing on a Thursday in Azar, in the corridor, with a folder on her knees, and she did not look at me while she asked it.

She said: "Do you remember what you told me? About the wall?"

I said I remembered.

She got her telephone out. She has it in the notes application where she wrote it with her thumbs in a courtyard in Shurabad in Bahman of 1405, and she has not moved it, and she read it out.

The hatred of the wronged is not a debt they owe. It is a wall the wrongdoer built, and it stands on his ground, and he pays the rent on it. She is not required to pull it down. She is required only to build her house somewhere else, and not against it.

I made that up. In eleven minutes. On a low wall by a tap, in front of a girl of nineteen who had asked me whether she was permitted to hate her father, and it is the finest thing I have ever written and it is not from anywhere and I told her it was older than both of us.

She said, "I did it. I did exactly that. I built somewhere else and I didn't build against it, and it worked, and I have been fine for four years."

Then she said: "So why has it stopped?"

And there it was.

She is twenty-three. She said that at nineteen it was the only useful thing anybody had ever given her, because everybody else wanted her to *arrive* somewhere — forgive him, get past it, write a letter you don't send — and I was the only person who told her she was allowed to simply not.

And that it worked. For four years.

And that in Mehr, for no reason she can identify, she found herself standing in a kitchen crying about a man she cannot remember the face of, and that she is angry about it, because she thought that was **finished**, and she had a ruling.

She said, "I'm twenty-three. I've got a husband and a house I might lose and I have not thought about him properly in two years. Why

now?"

I said, "Because you are about to lose a house."

She looked up.

And I said — and this is the closest I have come in six books to saying a true thing to her —

"A thing like this goes through a family and it takes everybody's money and everybody's sleep, and then at about the ninth month it starts asking a different question, which is: *who is behind me*. And you will find that you have an extremely good answer, and that there is one gap in it, and that the gap is not new. It has been there since you were four. It is only that you have not needed it until now."

She did not say anything for a while.

Then she said: "So what do I do?"

And I said I did not know.

That is the truth. I have invented scripture in three provinces and I sat in a corridor in Tehran in Azar of 1410 and I could not manufacture one syllable, and I told my daughter I did not know, and she said, "That's all right," and put her telephone back in her bag.

STATEMENT 13

The one building I have spent my life avoiding

The house is in Farid's name, and the deed is correct, and none of that is in question — but the charge attaches to the property, and to defend the property you have to establish the estate, and to establish the estate you need the household registration of a man who died in 1398.

Which is how I ended up in the provincial civil registry office.

I want to describe what that is, because everybody in this country has been in one and nobody outside it has ever heard of it, and it is the single most important building in an Iranian life.

Everything is in there. Every birth, every death, every marriage, every divorce, every name change, going back to when the registration started in the twenties, in bound books, in clerks' handwriting, in a building with a lift that does not work.

Your existence is in that building. Not a copy of it. The actual entry, in a book, on a shelf. If it is not in there you were never born, and if somebody writes in the wrong column you spend four years fixing it, and everybody in this country knows a story about that.

I had not been inside one since 1382.

I want to be honest about what walking through that door felt like for a man in my position, and the honest word is **nausea**. There is a book on a shelf in a building in Tehran with *Fani*, *Nader* in it, and a date in 1358, and my father's name, and my mother's name, and everything that has happened to me since is a series of increasingly elaborate arrangements to avoid ever being in the same room as that book.

And I walked into a provincial registry office in a black turban with a folder under my arm and asked a woman at a counter for an extract.

She gave it to me in eleven minutes.

Nobody looked at me twice. Nobody asks a cleric for anything. I stood in the one building on this earth designed for the sole purpose of establishing who people are, and I was not asked my name.

STATEMENT 14

A name on a folded page for four years

His name is Nasser Mokhtari [naa-SER mokh-taa-REE] and he is eighty and he has been on a folded page in my coat pocket for four years.

I want to set out how I found him, because it is not detective work and I have never done any detective work in my life.

The extract from the registry had a reference on it in a hand I could not read, and the woman at the counter said the older books were done differently and that if I wanted the marginal entries I would have to ask somebody who had worked there before the system changed, and that there was nobody, and then she said, "Well. There's Mokhtari."

She said it the way you say a name that is furniture.

I did not react. I want that on the record: I have had four years of professional practice at not reacting and I did not move one muscle in my face, and I asked, in the ordinary way, whether Mokhtari still came in.

She said he came in on Sundays sometimes because he cannot stop.

Four years.

An old schoolmaster wrote that name on a page four times, phonetically, at four points down the sheet, because he wanted to be certain — and he gave it to me standing beside a truck in the snow and said the man was alive and not far from where I was going, and put his hand on my arm above the elbow and said *do not go straight there*.

And I did not go straight there. I have been not going straight there for four years, across two provinces, and I have written that it was beginning to look less like obedience and more like a decision, and it was.

And then a woman behind a counter, in an entirely different matter, about somebody else's house, said his name as an administrative afterthought.

I have thought about this a great deal and I have two versions and I have never been able to hold either for longer than a month.

The first is that an old man in a gorge knew exactly where Nasser Mokhtari was and knew exactly what would have happened if I had gone up to his door and asked, and that everything since has been a thing he arranged with one sentence.

The second is that a man who spent thirty-one years in a civil registry office is, unsurprisingly, findable through a civil registry office, and that if I had gone straight there in 1406 I would have found him in a week and none of the rest of it would ever have happened.

I do not know which. I have never known which.

STATEMENT 15

An old man who has never been asked

He lives eleven streets from that office in a flat with a lift that works, and he has a wife who is smaller than he is and who let me in without asking a single question because of the hat, and he was pleased to have somebody in the house.

I want to be clear about Nasser Mokhtari before any of the rest of it: **he is not hiding anything and never was.**

There is no conspiracy in this book. There is a man of eighty with an excellent memory and a bad hip who did a job for thirty-one years and who has never once been asked about it by anybody, and who has been waiting his entire life for somebody to be interested, in exactly the way that every retired person on this earth is waiting for somebody to be interested.

I went for the marginal entries on a dead man's registration. That is genuinely why I went. I had a folder and a real question and I asked it, and he answered it in four minutes and it was extremely useful and it went into the case and it is in the ruling.

Then he made tea, and I stayed two hours, and he talked.

Here is what I did.

Nothing.

I have never in my life had to do less. I sat in a chair in a flat in Tehran with a glass of tea and I let an eighty-year-old man tell me about a filing system, and I used my mother's trick, which is the only thing I have — I asked him what he had done *before* the registry, because everybody has a before and nobody is ever asked about it.

And Nasser Mokhtari said: "Oh — I was in the seminary. For a bit. I was no good at it."

And then he said, "That was the year of the revolution. They sent us all out."

STATEMENT 16

He was in the room where they came back

He was twenty-eight in 1357 and he was not one of the boys with the notebooks.

He was in the room where they came back.

I want to be precise about what he was, because I got it wrong in my own head for about ten minutes and the correction is the whole thing.

The students went out into the villages with a form and asked people what they wanted from God. I have known that since a gorge in Bahman of 1405 and I have written about it. They filled the four columns and they came back and they handed the notebooks in to a man behind a desk who counted the pages.

Above that man there was somebody who read them.

And above *that*, in a different building, was a small office of three or four people whose job was purely administrative: to receive what came up, to sort it, and to **file it**.

Mokhtari was the youngest of them. He was twenty-eight, he had failed at the seminary and was embarrassed about it, and he had the neatest hand of anybody available, and so for one winter he was the man who put four thousand people's answers into an order.

He did not read them for meaning. He was not asked to and he did not have time. He sorted them by district and by the code in the fourth column and he wrote the district lists, and in Esfand it stopped, because everything stopped, and the boxes went somewhere and he went into the civil registry in the summer and stayed thirty-one years.

I asked him what happened to the boxes.

He said, "They went across the yard."

I asked what was across the yard.

He said, "The registry. The same building. It became the registry."

And he said it in the tone of a man mentioning that a shop had changed hands, and drank his tea.

Now.

I have written in these accounts that the man who collected the notebooks died in the war in 1361, and that the codes were never standardised, and that the boxes went somewhere and nobody has ever seen them again. A schoolmaster told me that in a gorge and he was right about all of it, and he was right because he was a boy in a village three hundred kilometres away who handed his book to a man in a town and never saw it again.

He did not know that the office they went to became a registry, and that a registry is the one kind of institution in this country that **never throws anything away**, because it cannot: its entire function is to hold the record of who exists, and a thing in a registry basement stays in a registry basement for the same reason your birth stays in a book.

I said, as flatly as I have ever said anything, "Are they still there?"

And Nasser Mokhtari said, "I should think so. Nobody's ever asked."

STATEMENT 17

Four days of not going

I want to be honest about the four days between that flat and that basement, because everybody assumes I went straight back and I did not.

I did not go for four days.

I have been asked why and I have given two answers and neither is true. The true one is this: for four years I have been a man who is looking for something, and being a man who is looking for something is a **position**, and it has organised every road I have taken since a truck in the snow, and I understood in a flat in Tehran that I was about ninety-six hours away from not being that man any more.

And I did not know what I was after that.

That is the whole of the four days. A man of fifty in a rented room being frightened of an answer, which is not a thing I would have predicted about myself and which I now think is extremely common.

On the fifth day I went back and asked Mokhtari to come with me, because a registry basement is not a place a member of the public walks into, and he said yes before I had finished the sentence, and he was **delighted**, and he put on a jacket.

That is the part I want in this account.

The largest fact of my existence was recovered from a basement by an eighty-year-old man with a bad hip who was pleased to have an outing, and who talked the whole way there about a colleague from 1364, and who found the district boxes in about forty minutes because he had written the labels himself and his own handwriting is the only index that has ever existed.

He said, "There. Khorasan. What are we looking for?"

And I said a village. And he said which one, and I said the name of a salt town at the end of a road with a blue dome in it, and he went along the boxes with his finger.

And he said, "Shurabad. Yes. Aban of 1357."

And he pulled it out and put it on a table and went to find the light switch for the other half of the room, because he wanted to show me

something else entirely — a thing about how the district lists were bound, which he had been telling me about in the car and was very keen on.

And I stood in a basement under a civil registry office in Tehran with a box open in front of me and my mother's name in it.

PART THREE — THE TABLE

Statements Eighteen to Twenty-Six

STATEMENT 18

Six days on a table under a lamp

I did not open it for six days.

I took it out of that basement. I want that in the account plainly, because it is theft and it is the last theft of my life and it was committed against an eighty-year-old man who had gone to find a light switch to show me something he was proud of.

There are four thousand people in those boxes. Nobody has looked at them since Esfand of 1357. I took one sheet — one, out of a bundle for one village in one month — and I put it inside my coat and I stood there and let Nasser Mokhtari come back and show me how the district lists were bound, and I asked him two questions about it and both of them were good questions and he was pleased with both, and then he drove me back and talked the whole way.

I have taken a great many things. I have never once felt anything about any of them and I have written about that at some length across five books, and it is one of the reasons I have been able to do what I do.

I felt something about that sheet and I have not been able to put it down since.

Six days it was in a coat on the back of a chair in a rented room in Tehran. I went to the corridor twice in those six days. I sat with Farid. I watched my daughter use a clerk's name in the second sentence.

And on the sixth night I got it out and put it on a table under a lamp.

I want to describe the physical object because I have described a great many documents in these six accounts and this is the last one.

Ruled paper, of the kind that was in every office in this country in the seventies. Four columns drawn by hand with a ruler and a pen, which is exactly what a schoolmaster in a gorge described to me over a stove five years ago — the same four columns in a different province by a different boy in the same winter.

Name. Place. What they said. And the fourth.

Forty-one entries on the sheet in a young man's hand. Careful, slightly ornate, slower at the beginning than at the end, which is

what a hand does when a person is getting used to a task.

And a third of the way down:

□□□□□□ □□□□ — □□□□□□

Parvaneh Fani. Tehran.

And I want to record, because it is the truth and because I have not been sentimental in six books and am not going to start on the last one:

I did not look at the third column for eleven minutes.

I sat in a rented room in Tehran at the age of fifty with the answer in front of me under a lamp, and I looked at the second column, which says Tehran, and I thought about a woman getting on a bus in the autumn of 1357 with a bag, on her own, four hundred kilometres, to a place she had never been, in the month the country came apart.

And I did not turn my head.

STATEMENT 19

What my mother wanted

Here is what my mother wanted.

I am going to give it exactly as it is written, because it is thirty-one words in a boy's handwriting and any arrangement I put around it would be me getting in the way.

The third column reads:

She has a son of four months. She says she does not love him and is frightened of it. She asks to be made to love him.

That is all. That is the whole of it.

I was born in the summer of 1358. In Aban of 1357 I did not exist.

She was already pregnant.

Four months. She went to that shrine in the autumn carrying me, and she stayed forty nights, and when the boy with the notebook sat in whatever room they gave her and asked her what she wanted from God, she told him the truth, because nobody had ever asked her anything and she did not know it was dangerous.

She did not ask for a child. I have spent four years assuming she asked for a child. Every version of this I have ever built in my head had a woman who could not conceive going four hundred kilometres for a son, and it is in one of these books in exactly those words, and I was wrong for four years about the one thing I thought I knew.

She had me already. She was frightened of the thing she was not feeling.

And she asked a stranger to fix it.

I want to say something about that woman and then I am going to stop.

Parvaneh could not read. She was twenty-two. She was married to a locksmith who kept a ledger with God and was always slightly ahead, and she was four months gone with a first child in the autumn of 1357 in a country that was coming apart, and she felt nothing, and she believed that this was a defect in her and that it was permanent and that it was hers alone.

She had nobody to ask. There was no one on this earth she could say that sentence to. Not her mother, not her husband, not a doctor, not a neighbour — a woman who says *I do not love my baby* in a two-room flat in Tehran in 1357 is a woman who has said something she cannot take back.

So she got on a bus.

Four hundred kilometres, alone, four months pregnant, to a shrine at the end of a road in a salt town, and she stayed forty nights and said it out loud to a boy of nineteen with a notebook, and then she came home and never mentioned it to anybody for the rest of her life.

She burned esfand over my head at every threshold I ever crossed. School. My wedding. The day they took me. I stood in her kitchen at nine years old with my eyes shut being embarrassed while she went round three times muttering, and I have written about that in three of these books as a joke about a superstitious woman.

Forty-eight years and she never once said it and she died with it.

I have been in that woman's kitchen ten thousand times.

STATEMENT 20

The fourth column reads: □□□□.

Possible.

And beside it, in the same hand, smaller, in the way a person writes when they have been told to note who did the thing:

□. □. □□□□□

S. H. Vahedi.

Sayyid Hadi Vahedi.

Nineteen years old in the autumn of 1357, in a stone room in a salt town, sitting opposite a frightened woman of twenty-two who had come four hundred kilometres to say a thing she could not say at home.

He wrote it down. He marked it *possible*. And then, because a want marked possible is a want that a human being is expected to arrange, he did what he was told.

I do not know what he did. There is nothing in that column about what he did and there never was going to be. Forty nights of something. A woman with nobody to talk to and a boy of nineteen with a notebook and forty nights, and at the end of it she got on a bus and went home to Tehran and had a son in the summer and raised him for forty-two years.

She could read a room in four seconds. She could tell you who was pregnant and who was being cheated on before the tea arrived, and she gave that to me and it is the only thing I have ever had.

She carried a propane cylinder up four flights of stairs every week of her life.

She burned a seed over my head at every threshold I ever crossed, and she did it for forty-two years, and I have called it superstition in three books.

And Sayyid Hadi Vahedi went on to spend forty-six years as the custodian of a shrine at the end of a road in a town of nine hundred people, and never married, and never left, and was carried into a hospital in Mashhad in the autumn of 1404 and died on a gurney in a pre-operative bay with his hands arranged on his chest by somebody

who had cared enough to arrange them.

And a man in the next bay with a stone in his gallbladder got up, and went through a curtain, and said *excuse me* out loud in an empty room, and took his coat.

I did not steal a stranger's clothes.

I took them off the man my mother was sent to.

Everything in five books came out of that coat. The shrine, the clinic, the school, the prison, the house at the border, the boy in the cab, forty children who said their own names on a first morning, a woman who lived, a boy who did not, a heater that was replaced in eleven days, nineteen pages that ended a decent man's working life.

All of it came out of a coat I took off the man who was sent to arrange me.

He was already dead. He had been dead about an hour.

There is nobody to tell.

STATEMENT 21

The stone, and who got me seen on a Sunday

The stone went in Dey.

It has been in me since 1404. It is the size of a chickpea and it is the reason I am not still in Vakilabad, because it produced a hospital transfer at exactly the right moment and I have written that a chickpea saved my life and that this tells you how God conducts His business — He does not send angels, He sends sediment.

Twenty-nine years I have carried it. It has hurt four times and each time it stopped.

In Dey it did not stop.

I am not going to make a great deal of the four days. It is an ordinary and extremely common thing and any adult who has had it will know exactly what I am describing and nobody else will care: a pain under the ribs on the right that comes in waves and does not care what you are, and by the third day I could not stand up straight and by the fourth I was the colour of a wall.

Golnar found me in the corridor.

That is how it happened and I have never got over the arrangement of it. I went to that court building on the Sunday because there was a filing to be done and because I had spent nine months not missing a day, and I sat on a bolted plastic bench and could not get up, and my daughter came out of an office with a folder and saw a cleric of fifty in difficulty and did what she does.

She got a car. She rang somebody. She stood in a hospital reception and used a man's name in the second sentence and got me seen in ninety minutes on a Sunday afternoon, which is a thing I have never once managed anywhere.

And when they asked her who I was, she said: **"He's with me."**

I have been six men. Nobody has ever answered that question about me in three words.

STATEMENT 22

A hospital, and no papers in any name

They said gallbladder and they said it should come out and they said Thursday, and I want to record the practical position of a man in my situation in a hospital, because it is the only genuinely frightening part of this book.

I have no papers.

I have a Ministry of Health identity card belonging to a doctor who has been dead five years, which I have carried since a luggage rack in 1405 and which is the only document I own, and which is precisely the document you cannot produce in a hospital, because a hospital is full of people who know what one of those looks like.

So the arrangement was made the way arrangements are made here: Golnar's insurance would not stretch, and a cleric who has been in a court corridor for nine months has acquired the one asset that actually moves things in this country, which is **eleven people who owe him a small kindness**, and one of them has a cousin.

It went through. It cost a great deal of money that Mahnaz put up and has never mentioned since, which is her fourth largest act in this book and the one nobody sees.

And they put me on a table in a hospital in Mashhad.

The same city. Not the same building — I want to be exact, because everybody assumes it was the same building and it was not, it was four kilometres away and a different institution entirely.

But it is the same city, and I lay on a trolley in a pre-operative bay with a curtain on a rail, and there was a man in the next bay, and I could see his feet.

STATEMENT 23

What it does is switch off the alarm

I am going to try to write down what happened between the pre-med and the coming back up, and I have tried perhaps forty times over twenty years and I have never got it, and this is the last attempt and it will also fail.

What they gave me is a thing that is given every day in every hospital in the world. I have since had it explained to me properly by a person qualified to explain it. It is not exotic and it is not mystical and there is no shortage of men who will tell you at length that it is only chemistry.

They are right. It is only chemistry. So is everything else that has ever happened to me and I have stopped finding that argument interesting.

Here is what it does, and this is the part that is documented and boring and that I want down before the rest:

It separates you from the alarm.

Not from the pain. From the **apparatus**. Every human being carries a machine that runs constantly and whose entire job is to keep the self intact — the thing that flinches, the thing that explains, the thing that produces a defence before you have finished being accused. It runs so continuously that nobody has ever heard it, in the way that nobody has ever heard their own house.

It switches off.

And what is left is not peace and not terror and not insight. What is left is a man with all of his faculties and none of his interests.

I was outside. I was slightly above and to the left of the table and about two metres back, which is a stupid thing to write down and is exactly where I was.

And the first thing I noticed — before anything, before it stopped being a room — is this.

The body was older than I had been carrying it as.

That is all. A man of fifty on a table with his arms out, and the chest was wrong, and the hair at the temples was wrong, and the hands

were the hands of somebody I would have described, professionally, from a stairwell, as *older, not a runner, would go over on a wall*.

I have been fifty for a year. I have shaved that face every day.

I have been carrying it at about thirty-eight since roughly 1997, which is when I stopped looking, and I looked down from two metres and there was no defence available and it was not thirty-eight and had not been for a very long time.

STATEMENT 24
A survey, room by room

Then it stopped being a room.

I want to be careful here. Nothing appeared. There was no light and there was no queue of women on a wall and nobody came in from a yard with a bowl of herbs. I have had three of those and this was not one.

What happened is that I went through it the way I go through a building.

That is the only description I have and I have offered it to two people and both of them found it cold. It was cold. **There was no feeling in any of it**, and that is precisely why I could do it, and it is why it worked, and it is why nineteen years of a thing I could not look at for four seconds became something I walked through at my own pace with my hands behind my back.

A survey. Room by room. The way I have gone through six hundred of them.

Room one. A girl of four holding a spoon in her whole fist like a weapon, narrating her food. *The rice is going to the corner. The rice does not want to.* And a man of thirty-one laughing at it, and her mother saying *God help us, she's got your mouth*, and the man being pleased about that.

Room two. Five. I am not in it.

Room three. Eight. There is a birthday in it and I know about it because my mother told me about it on a telephone eleven days later and I said *good, good* and asked about her hip.

Room four. Eleven. A photograph of her at four in a wallet, six years out of date by then, and a man who has looked at it perhaps four times.

Room five. Thirteen. The last one. A telephone call I made from a place I do not want to name, and she said *hi* the way you say it to somebody you do not know, and I said something about school and she answered it politely, and it lasted ninety seconds and I got off and stood in a street and told myself I had done the right thing by not making it worse.

Room six. Nothing. Nineteen at the shrine and twenty-three in a corridor and nothing at all in between.

And then the thing I have never been able to do awake, which is that I went back into room five and looked at the man in it properly.

I have carried a sentence since 2010 and it is this: *I stayed away because it was cleaner for her.*

I have never examined it. That is what I understood two metres above a table in Mashhad — not that it was a lie, it is not a lie, there is something true in it — but that it was a **draft**. I wrote it in about four minutes in 2010, in a bad week, to get through an afternoon. And then I never read it back. I carried it for fifteen years, unrevised, and made every decision of my adult life out of it, and it was the first thing that came to hand.

And the photograph.

I have been extremely proud of that photograph. It is in one of these books as a small sad ornament — *he carries her photograph* — and my own aunt used to tell people about it.

It is not devotion.

It is filing.

You put a thing in a file so that you do not have to hold it. I put a four-year-old in a wallet in 2010 and I did not update it for six years, and every time I did not update it I was confirming the filing, and a man who has a photograph of a child has a **matter that is being dealt with**, and it never once cost him a single afternoon.

STATEMENT 25

Nineteen is not most of it

And then the arithmetic, and it came in my own voice, flat, the way I do a job.

I have counted things all my life. Six hundred doors. Eighty apologies. Eleven weeks. Four hundred and eleven. Forty names. Six men. I have written in every one of these books that it is not a virtue, it is the only thing my head does on its own.

Two metres above a table with the alarm switched off, my head did what it does.

She is twenty-three.

I am fifty. The tables give a man in this country something in the region of seventy-five, and I have had four years of prison food and a great deal of walking and no doctor since 1401, so call it seventy. That is twenty years.

And she has fifty.

So the shared remainder is twenty years, less whatever the stone and the coat take off it.

I have had nineteen. Nineteen years of not being there.

Nineteen is not most of it.

That is the whole of it. That is what happened to me in a hospital in Mashhad in Dey of 1410 and it is not a revelation and there is nothing spiritual in it whatsoever. It is a sum, and I have been able to do sums since I was nine, and I had simply never once run this one — because to run it you have to be willing to look at the numerator, and the machine that switches off under anaesthetic is the exact machine that had prevented me for fifteen years.

Nineteen years of it is gone and about twenty of it is not.

I have spent my whole life believing that the thing was finished and that the only honourable position available was to stay away and be sorry in an orderly manner.

It is not finished. It is a little under half done.

And I want to write down the second half of it, because a book that stops there is a lie and I have not lied to you in six of these.

The only door out of that room is the coat.

I cannot be her father. There is no version. If I go to her as Nader Fani she loses the man in the corridor and gains a thief and a fraud and fifteen years of a document that says he could not be found, and Mahnaz did that arithmetic thirteen years ago and got the right answer and I have never found a hole in it.

What I can be is a man in a corridor who answers a telephone.

For twenty years.

So I lay on a table under a light and worked out, with no feeling anywhere in me at all, that I had about twenty years left and a daughter for the whole of them, and that the price of every hour of it was that I would have to go on being somebody else until I died.

And I decided to pay it.

That is the fraud stopping being a crime and becoming a **vocation**, and I understood that too, up there, at the same time, with the same absence of feeling. I know exactly what I chose. Nobody made me. There was no room in my head at that moment for a single self-serving sentence and I chose it anyway.

STATEMENT 26
Oriented to person only

Coming back up takes about half an hour and I have no memory of any of it.

What I have is a note.

They gave me the file to take to a follow-up and I read it in a corridor four days later, which is not something patients do and which I did because I read everything.

Recovery observations, ten past four in the afternoon.

Patient agitated on emergence. Oriented to person only. Repeating name. Settled by 16:40.

Oriented to person only. That is a standard phrase and it means: he does not know where he is or what day it is, but he knows **who he is**.

Repeating name.

I have asked. The nurse who wrote it does not remember; she does eleven of those a day and it is the most ordinary line in the notes.

But I know what I was saying, because there is only one thing a man in that condition says over and over when they ask him who he is, and it is the answer, and the answer is not Vahedi and it is not the doctor on the card and it is not Panjshanbeh.

I said my own name.

Out loud, in a room, in a hospital in Mashhad, correctly, repeatedly, to a nurse who wrote *agitated* and moved on to the next bay.

The first time in twenty-nine years I have said it in a room with another human being in it. It went into a file that nobody will ever read. And I said it about twenty minutes after deciding, on a table, with total clarity, to spend the rest of my life under somebody else's.

PART FOUR — THE COURT

Statements Twenty-Seven to Thirty-Five

STATEMENT 27

Branch 4, and fifty minutes on the day

The hearing was on the fourth of Esfand at nine in the morning and it took the whole day, and I am going to give it to you at the speed it happened, because everybody thinks a thing like this is an argument and it is not, it is **a long slow administrative afternoon with a person's house in it.**

Branch 4. Third floor. The same building I had been sitting in the corridor of for eleven months.

Here is the room.

It is not large. It is about the size of a classroom and it is arranged like an office, because it is an office. A desk at the far end, raised by nothing — the judge sits at a desk on the same floor as everybody else, which I want to put down for anyone who imagines a bench. Behind him, on the wall, the emblem and a framed verse. To one side, a clerk at a table with a screen.

Two rows of chairs. Not a gallery: chairs, of the moulded kind, in two rows, and the parties sit in them, and the parties are about four metres from the judge and about two metres from each other.

There is no jury. There has never been a jury in a matter like this. One man reads everything and decides.

Present: the judge. The clerk. Mr Rahimi [ra-hee-MEE] and his client, the son from Karaj, and the son's sister, who came and said nothing all day and cried twice. Farid. Golnar. Mahnaz, at the back, in a chair by the door, who did not once come further into the room than that and who I have thought about ever since.

And a cleric of fifty in a black turban, sitting where I was told to sit, with my hands on my knees.

I want to say what I felt walking in and it is not what anybody expects.

I have been in a court twice. Once in 1401 in Mashhad, in the other chair, and once in 1382 about something that came to nothing. Both times I was the object of the room.

This time I was **an item on a list**, and the list was on a screen, and we were the fourth thing on it.

We waited fifty minutes.

I want that in the account, because it is the truest thing about a court in any country: fifty minutes in a corridor, on the day, in the clothes, after eleven months, and nobody says anything, and Farid went out twice, and Golnar read the front page of her own folder four times without seeing it, and the boy from Karaj sat opposite us with his hands folded and looked at the floor because he is not a bad man and he had worked out some months ago that he was doing something to a cousin.

STATEMENT 28

The paper wins by default

The judge is a man of about sixty and I liked him inside ninety seconds, which by now the reader will recognise as the beginning of trouble.

He is not theatrical. He does not look up when you come in. He read for eleven minutes at the start without saying a word to anybody, which is a thing that terrifies laymen and which I have since been told is simply a man doing the job properly, and then he asked Mr Rahimi three questions.

The three questions were: is the signature disputed, is the sum disputed, and is the debt disputed.

Rahimi said no, no, and the third one is the matter.

And the judge said, "Yes," and wrote something.

That is the whole of the first hour. Two men establishing, in about four minutes, that there is exactly one question in this case, and then an hour of documents being handed forward one at a time and looked at.

Here is what I understood sitting in that chair, and it is a thing I had not understood in eleven months of corridors.

The paper wins by default.

Not because the system is corrupt and not because anybody in that room wanted the house taken. Because a court is an instrument for resolving a dispute between two people who cannot agree, and the only material it can work with is what can be put on a desk, and there was a signed and witnessed acknowledgement of debt on that desk, and on our side there was **a thing nine people knew.**

I have spent five years walking into institutions in other men's clothes and every single time the fraud has worked because the institution could only see the document. In a shrine, in a clinic, in a school, in a prison, in a house at a border. A stamp is more real than a fact. I have written that sentence in three of these books and been very pleased with it.

I sat in Branch 4 on the fourth of Esfand and watched the same machine, running correctly, about to take my daughter's house — for

the identical reason, in the identical way, because the truth had not been written down and the lie had.

I have been the beneficiary of that machine six times.

STATEMENT 29

How do you come to know this family?

Mr Rahimi asked me the question at about eleven o'clock and it was not the one anybody was braced for.

He is fifty-something, courteous, extremely well prepared, and he had the whole matter in his head without notes, which is rare and which I noticed and admired at the exact moment it was being used against me.

He did not ask me whether I was telling the truth. Nobody ever asks that; it is a question for television.

He stood up and said, to the judge, that he had no objection to the sworn statement in principle, and that his only concern was the ordinary one — that the court would wish to be satisfied as to the **standing** of the person offering it.

And then he turned and asked me, pleasantly:

"Haj Aqa. How do you come to know this family?"

That is the question. That is all it is. It is administrative, it is entirely reasonable, it is the first thing any competent advocate asks, and there is no answer to it.

The true answer is that in Bahman of 1405, in a village on a dying qanat, wearing a stolen doctor's identity card, I telephoned a cleric I had met once in a corridor and asked him four minutes of questions about a family in his district, because my daughter was going to marry into it and I wanted to know whether the boy was any good.

I want to set out what was available to me in the four seconds, because I have had four seconds five times in five years and this is the only one where I have ever had to *build* something rather than accept something.

I could not say the shrine, because the shrine is checkable and I am not in it and have not been since 1406.

I could not say I knew the father, because the father died in 1398 and the room contained his son.

And I could not say nothing, because in that room, on that day, nothing was the same as no.

So I told the truth about the mechanism and lied about the direction.

I said that in Bahman of 1405 I had been asked, in confidence, by a colleague, to make enquiry as to the standing of a family in that district in connection with a matter of marriage — which is a thing that happens in this country ten thousand times a day and which every man in that room has either done or had done to him — and that in the course of that enquiry the position regarding the deceased and his brother had been described to me in some detail.

Every clause of that is true.

I did not say who asked. I did not say who was marrying. And Mr Rahimi, who is a good advocate, asked me the follow-up, which was **who** made the enquiry.

And I said: "I am not able to say. It was in confidence and it concerns a young woman's family."

There was a small silence.

And then the judge said, without looking up: "That is proper."

I have thought about those three words more than about anything else in this book.

Because they were correct. He was not doing me a favour and he was not being lax. In a matter concerning a marriage enquiry about a young woman, a cleric declining to name the party is **exactly what the law and the custom expect**, and any judge in this country would have said the same thing, and it is a good rule and it exists to protect women.

I hid behind a rule that exists to protect women, in a room containing my daughter, in order to avoid saying her name.

Rahimi sat down. He was not annoyed. He had asked the right question, and had been given a proper answer, and he moved on, because that is what a professional does.

STATEMENT 30

Ninety seconds, and every word of it true

They put it to the oath after the recess and it took about ninety seconds and I have not been able to write about it for twenty years.

I want to explain the instrument first, because it is not a formality here and everybody outside this country thinks it is.

In our procedure, when the evidence runs out and there is no document, the court can put the matter to an oath. It is not a preliminary. It is the **decision itself**. A properly administered oath, in the correct terms, on the Book, ends the question — and everybody in that room, including the man from Karaj who was about to lose, believed that.

That is not a legal belief. It is older than the law. There are men in this country who have walked out of a courtroom and given up a house rather than swear, and everyone in the building understands exactly what has happened when they do, and nobody thinks worse of them, and the case is over.

The clerk brought it forward.

I stood up.

I am a burglar. I have been in six hundred buildings that were not mine and I have never once been afraid in any of them. I have been in a stone chamber full of smoke and had something use my prison name, and ninety feet under a desert with a colleague in a bad mood, and on a table in Mashhad two metres above my own body.

I put my hand on that Book in a black turban I took off a dead man, claiming descent from the Prophet, in front of my daughter, and said the words.

And every word of what I then said was true.

That is the part. That is the thing I have never been able to arrange. I did not perjure myself. Not one syllable. I said that I had been informed, in Bahman of 1405, by a person with direct knowledge, that the sum recorded in that instrument had been repaid in full within fourteen months by means outside the banking system, and that the instrument had been executed as a matter of form and not as a subsisting debt, and that this was the common understanding of

the family at the time.

True. All of it. I know it is true because I heard it from a man who had no reason to lie to me about a family in his own district, four years before any of this existed, when nobody could have imagined a use for it.

The most honest ninety seconds of my life were delivered in stolen clothes under a name that belongs to a dead man, and they were only possible because of the clothes.

Golnar was four metres behind me.

I did not look at her. I have never once, in six books, been so careful about where my eyes were.

STATEMENT 31

An hour and forty minutes with nowhere to go

Then nothing happened for an hour and forty minutes, and it is the best hour and forty minutes in this book and I am going to give it to you in full.

The judge said he would consider, and that the parties should remain available, and he went out through a door behind the desk, and the clerk went with him.

And eleven people stood up in a room and had nowhere to go.

That is what a court actually is. Not the oath. **The corridor afterwards**, with both sides in it, four metres apart, for an hour and forty minutes, with nothing left to do and nothing left to say and a house between them.

The son from Karaj went and stood at the window at the far end.

His sister sat down on a bench and cried for the second time that day, quietly, and her brother did not go to her, and after about ten minutes Farid — Farid, who is thirty and sells agricultural parts and stood to lose his father's house that afternoon — went over and asked her if she wanted a glass of water.

I want that in the record and I want it left alone.

Golnar went out into the stairwell and came back after twenty minutes with four teas that she had got from somewhere in a building that has no tea, and gave one to Farid, one to her mother, one to me, and put the fourth one down on the bench next to the sister without saying anything and walked away.

Mahnaz watched her do it.

And then Mahnaz Shokri looked across a corridor at me, for about a second and a half, and it is the only time in fifteen years that woman has looked at me without an assessment in it.

Nobody spoke for the last forty minutes.

I sat on a bolted plastic bench in a court building in Tehran on the fourth of Esfand with my daughter three feet away, in a coat I stole off the man my mother was sent to, having just told the entire truth under oath in a false name, waiting for a stranger to decide whether

she would keep her house.

And I would like to record that it was the happiest I have ever been.

I have turned that over for twenty years and I cannot make it come out any other way, and I have stopped trying to make it come out any other way, and if that is a defect in me then it is the one I would keep.

STATEMENT 32

Twenty-two minutes, and the answer is last

He came back at ten past three and he did not sit down straight away, and everybody stood up, and there was a small sound in that room of eleven people breathing.

I want to describe how a ruling is delivered here, because it is nothing like the thing people imagine and the difference is the entire reason this chapter exists.

He does not announce a result.

There is no moment. He does not say *I find for* anybody. He sits down, and he begins at the beginning, and he reads out — in official Persian, in a flat administrative register, at dictation speed, because the clerk is typing — the whole reasoning, clause by clause, in order, and the answer is the last thing in it.

It took twenty-two minutes.

And you sit there. That is the thing nobody prepares you for. For twenty-two minutes you sit in a chair in a room and a man in front of you assembles the entire matter aloud, in the order in which he thought about it, and you cannot tell from his voice at any point which way it is going, because the register does not change.

The first eleven minutes were the other side.

He set out the instrument. He set out that the signature was not disputed, that the execution was regular, that the witnessing was proper, that the sum was calculable, and that on the face of it the instrument created a charge upon the property.

Eleven minutes of that. Golnar sat with her back absolutely straight and her hands flat on her knees and did not move once, and at about the seventh minute Farid put his hand over hers on her knee and she did not look at him.

Everything he said was correct. That is what nobody understands about being in a room like that. You are not listening to somebody being wrong about you. You are listening to a competent man accurately describe the strongest version of the case against you, at length, at dictation speed, and every clause of it is true.

Then he said: *however*.

STATEMENT 33

And then he described me

And then he described me.

I want to give this exactly and I have had twenty years to find a better way and there is not one.

He did not say *the witness said*. In our courts, when a judge summarises evidence in a ruling, he refers to the person in the third person and in the formal register, with the description they hold, and he says what they attested to.

So a judge in Branch 4 in Tehran, on the fourth of Esfand, at about twenty past three in the afternoon, said aloud, for the clerk to type:

Having regard to the sworn statement of the said Sayyid Hadi Vahedi, a cleric, whose standing the court has no reason to doubt, and who attested upon oath that...

And then he read out my ninety seconds back to me, in the third person, in official Persian, as a finding.

I am going to try to be accurate about what happened in me, because there was a great deal of it and it arrived all at once and in no order.

The first was the name. *Sayyid Hadi Vahedi*. Said out loud, in an institution, by a judge, into a record.

That man was nineteen years old in a stone room in the autumn of 1357 with a notebook, and a frightened woman of twenty-two who had come four hundred kilometres told him a thing she could not tell anybody, and he wrote it down and marked it *possible*, and then he spent forty-six years in that same town and never married and never left, and died on a gurney in Mashhad with his hands arranged on his chest.

Nobody has said his name in an official room since 1404. There was no funeral I know of. There is a paper transfer in a shrine ledger that says he went to Mashhad, and it is dated four weeks before he actually died, and I have written about that.

And a state institution, in a formal record that will exist for as long as this country has records, said his name, and said *whose standing the court has no reason to doubt*, and attached to it the only

completely true thing I have ever said out loud in public.

The second was that he was describing a man who does not exist, and describing him **accurately**.

Every clause of what he said about that witness was correct. A cleric — yes, in every sense that has ever mattered in a room, for fourteen months in a shrine and eleven months in that corridor. Standing — yes; forty people on that floor would have vouched for me and eleven of them would have meant it. Attested upon oath — yes, and true.

There was not one false word in the description. It was simply attached to nobody.

And the third, which took about two more seconds and which I have never got out from under.

I have spent five years proving that a document beats a fact. That a stamp is more real than what happened. I have used it in five institutions and I have been extremely pleased with myself about it in five books.

And I sat in a chair on the fourth of Esfand and watched the same principle, at full power, in the correct hands, for the right reason — **create me**.

The most real I have ever been in my life was a sentence about a man who is dead, typed by a clerk, in a document I will never see.

STATEMENT 34

Two sentences and eleven seconds

The finding is two sentences and it took about eleven seconds.

He found that the instrument, while regular on its face, did not evidence a subsisting obligation at the date of the deceased's death, having regard to the sworn statement and to the absence of any demand or acknowledgement over a period of eighteen years.

And he dismissed the application for the charge.

Golnar keeps the house.

I want to record what happened in that room in the following ninety seconds because I have been in a great many rooms at the moment they turn and I have never been in one like it.

Nothing.

Nobody made a sound. Farid did not move. Golnar did not move. The son from Karaj looked at his lawyer and his lawyer gave him a very small nod that meant *yes, that is what happened, we will talk outside*, and the sister put her hand over her mouth, and the clerk carried on typing because he had four more lines to do.

The judge said the parties would be notified in writing, and stood up, and everyone stood up, and he went out.

It was over at twenty-eight minutes past three.

Eleven months.

Outside, on the landing, Mr Rahimi came over and shook Farid's hand and said something correct and pleasant, and then he shook mine, and he said — and he meant it, and this is a man who had just lost —

"That was well given, Haj Aqa."

And I said thank you.

And he said, "Not many people will swear. You would be surprised."

Then he went down the stairs with his client.

I have thought about that too. A professional of thirty years' standing told a burglar in a stolen coat that his oath was well given, and he

was right, and I have never been paid a compliment I earned more completely or deserved less.

STATEMENT 35

Why did you?

Golnar cried in the stairwell for about four minutes and then stopped and was extremely embarrassed, which is the whole of my family in one sentence.

She did it with her back to everybody and one hand on the rail, and Farid stood about a metre away and did not touch her and did not say anything, which was correct, and which I want on the record as the fourth or fifth time in this book that man has done exactly the right thing without being told.

Mahnaz did not go to her either.

She stood at the top of the stairs with her bag over her arm and watched her daughter cry and did not move, and I understood — after about a minute, watching them both — that this was not coldness, it was thirteen years of practice at **letting a person finish**, which she has had to do a great many times about a great many things, most of them me.

Then Golnar came up the stairs and said, "Right," and wiped her face with the back of her hand and said, "Right," again.

And she said to me: "You didn't have to swear."

I said it was nothing.

And she said, "It isn't nothing. My mother told me. She said people don't do that. She said in this country you can lose a house rather than swear and nobody thinks less of you."

I did not look at Mahnaz.

I want it in the record that I did not look at Mahnaz, and that Mahnaz was standing four feet away and had told her daughter that specific true fact at some point in the preceding eleven months, and that I have never known and will never know whether she said it before the hearing or after.

Then Golnar said: "Why did you?"

And I said the only sentence I have ever said to my daughter that was completely true in both directions.

I said: "**Because I knew it.**"

PART FIVE — A NUMBER

Statements Thirty-Six to Forty

STATEMENT 36

I haven't got very many people I can ring

I want to give the corridor.

Not the stairwell — that was four minutes and it is written. The corridor, twenty minutes later, on the ground floor, by the doors, when it was finished and everybody was going.

Farid had gone to get the car. Mahnaz had gone to speak to somebody about the written notification, which she did not need to do, and which she did because she is a woman who leaves a room when a room needs her to leave it.

So it was the two of us for about ninety seconds, standing in a corridor in a court building, with people going past both ways.

She said, "I don't know how to thank you."

I said the thing you say.

And she said, "No, but — eleven months. You came every time. You didn't miss one."

I said it was on my way, which is a lie of a kind I have told perhaps ten thousand times and which is the only lie I regret from that entire day.

And then she said it.

She said: "**I haven't got very many people I can ring.**"

Not sadly. That is what I want in the record and it is the thing that took the legs out from under me. She said it briskly, in the way you state a fact about your circumstances that you have long since stopped feeling anything about — the way you say *I don't drive* — and she said it while looking at her telephone to check whether Farid had come round.

Twenty-three years old. Married to a decent man. A mother she is close to. And a list of people she can ring that is short enough for her to have counted it.

I have been to a great many places in five years and done a great many things in other men's clothes, and I have written about most of them with some pleasure.

I made that. That is mine. That is the only thing in this entire account that I built myself, from nothing, over nineteen years, by a series of small correct-seeming decisions taken in bad weeks and never once read back.

And then she said the four words.

She said: "Can I ring you again?"

STATEMENT 37

She was right about the arithmetic

I said yes.

I want to be honest about the size of it, because a reader who has come this far deserves better than a man pretending that was a large moment. It was not large. It took a second. She was looking at her telephone.

But I had agreed with Mahnaz Shokri, in a car park in Tir, in eleven seconds, standing up, that when this was finished I would go and not come back and not ring her. And Mahnaz was correct in every particular. She had done the arithmetic thirteen years earlier and it is the only piece of arithmetic in this book that nobody has ever found a hole in, and I have looked.

And I said yes to my daughter in a corridor in about a second, and I did not even have the decency to hesitate.

Here is what I have worked out since, and it does not exonerate me.

Mahnaz was right about the arithmetic and wrong about the alternative.

Her sum was: a man in her life who is not her father, under a false name, forever, and one day she loses two people at once and she is thirty-five.

That is correct. Every part of it. I have not found the hole and there is not one.

But her sum has another side, and it is the side you can only see if you are the one being rung. It is:

twenty years of somebody answering.

And I had been two metres above a table in Mashhad six weeks earlier with the alarm switched off, and I had worked out that there were about twenty years in it, and that nineteen was not most of it.

So I said yes.

I want it recorded that I know exactly what I chose and what it costs and who pays for it, and that I did not choose it in the corridor. I chose it on a table in Dey and the corridor was just the day it got asked.

And that if Mahnaz Shokri ever reads this, she will not be surprised by one word of it, because she is the only person on this earth who has ever known what I am, and she knew when she rang me on the ninth of Tir that this was how it would end, and she rang me anyway, because her daughter was going to lose a house.

She has been doing sums for thirteen years in which she is always the one who pays.

STATEMENT 38

A plan, which I have never made for anything

I did the plan on the Friday, in a rented room, on paper.

I have never done this before. I want that in the record because it is genuinely the most surprising thing in six books: a man of fifty who has made no plan, ever, for anything — not for the border he was going to cross in twelve days in 1404, not for what he would do after any of the six coats came off, not for one single hour of his own life beyond the next building — sat down at a table with a pen and made a plan for **a relationship**.

Here is what is on the paper. I have it still.

One. The number. She has a number. It is a telephone I have had for eleven months and it must not change, ever, and that means it must be paid for in a way that does not depend on me being anywhere, and I have arranged that, and it is the single most expensive thing I do.

Two. Answering. It must be answered. Not returned — **answered**, on the day, because a person who rings twice and gets nothing stops ringing, and the entire value of this arrangement is that it is reliable, and reliability is the only asset I have ever manufactured that was not stolen.

Three. Distance. I do not live in Tehran and I will not. A man who is available for a matter is a man who arrives; a man who is nearby is a man who is expected at Nowruz, and Nowruz is a table with people at it and a chair, and I have sat in one of those before and I know what it does.

Four. The coat. The coat is now permanent. Not a costume I put on for a purpose. It is what I wear, for the rest of it, and I have written in this account that this converts the fraud from a crime into a vocation and I am not going to soften that now.

Five. What happens if I am taken.

That is the one I spent four hours on.

If I am arrested, or if the stone finishes what it started, that number stops answering and she never finds out why, and a woman who has already had one man go silent gets a second one, and the second one

is the same man.

So there is an arrangement. There is a person who has an envelope. Inside it is not a confession — I want to be clear, there is no letter in that envelope that tells her anything — there is simply a means by which she would be told, once, by somebody, that the man she rang has died. Nothing else. No name.

It is the smallest possible decency and it took me four hours and it is the only thing I have ever set up in my life for a moment when I would not be there.

Six. On the paper, in my own hand, the last line, and I do not remember writing it:

Do not be a father. Be a telephone that works.

STATEMENT 39

There is nobody to tell

I want to deal with the sheet.

It has been in a coat since the basement. It has been in that coat through a hospital, an operation, half an hour of saying my own name to a nurse, eleven months of corridors, an oath, and a ruling.

Forty-one entries. A third of the way down: *Parvaneh Fani. Tehran.* A woman of twenty-two four months gone who said the truest thing she ever said to a boy of nineteen with a notebook. □□□□. *S. H. Vahedi.*

I have thought about what to do with it every day for a year.

Golnar. No. There is no version of that conversation that does not begin with who I am, and it would cost her the man in the corridor and give her a thief, and Mahnaz did that sum in 1389 and got the right answer.

Mahnaz. I considered it for a long time and it is the only one that was ever close, because she is the only person who could hear it, and because she is owed something and I have nothing else. And then I understood that giving it to her would be handing a woman who has carried one line for thirteen years a second thing to carry, and that I would be doing it to be **known**, which is the only appetite I have never been able to get out of myself.

The boy. He rang twice this year from a road. He is twenty-one and he has a licence in his own name now and he is doing well and he tells me about margins for eleven minutes at a time. He does not know one single thing about any of this and he is not going to, because he is the one person in the world who thinks well of me and I am not going to spend that.

Nasser Mokhtari died in Aban. His wife told me on the telephone. He was eighty-one and he had a fall and there was a fortnight in a hospital, and she said he had been pleased about the basement and had told a number of people about it, and I sat down on a step in a street when she said that.

So there is nobody.

That is not self-pity and I want it read flatly, because it is simply the position: I am the only person alive who knows what my mother wanted, and what was done about it, and by whom, and what he wore, and where the coat went.

Six books ago I put on a dead man's clothes because they were on a chair and nobody was watching the chair.

I have found out, at fifty, that the chair was not an accident and that the man in it was the answer, and that he had been dead about an hour, and that everything I have done since — a shrine, a clinic, a school, a prison, a house at a border, a court in Tehran — came out of a coat I took off the man my mother was sent to.

And I cannot tell one person.

That is the finding. Everything else in these six accounts was a thing I did to somebody. This is a thing that was done to me before I was born, correctly, by a boy of nineteen doing what he was told, and it worked, and here I am.

The sheet goes in the bag. The bag has in it: a comb, a tin of wire hooks, a photograph of a woman who was either somebody's mother or somebody's wife, an exercise book with thirty-one names crossed out in the back, a folded page with a name on it written four times, and forty-one entries on a sheet of ruled paper from Aban of 1357.

Somebody will open that bag one day and will not know what any of it is.

STATEMENT 40

A number

She rang in Ordibehesht about something small.

I am not going to say what. It was small — it was the kind of thing you ring somebody about when you have decided that they are a person you ring, and that is the whole of its significance and it has none of any other kind.

It took nine minutes. I was useful for about four of them.

At the end she said, "Sorry, this was probably nothing."

And I said it was not nothing.

And she said, "Okay. Thanks, Haj Aqa," and rang off, and that was all, and I stood in a street in a town I am not going to name and looked at a telephone.

I have been six men.

A burglar for twenty-seven years, which was not a success. A sayyid in a salt town for fourteen months. A doctor on a dying qanat for fourteen weeks. A teacher in a gorge for four months, which is the only one I would do again. An inspector with a lanyard for nine days, which is the only one that had power in it. And a brother-in-law who was never anybody's brother-in-law.

And now a seventh, which does not have a place or a duration and is not going to end, and which is not a coat at all.

It is a number.

There is a poem about thirty birds who go a very long way to find a king. I have never read it. It has been told to me five times by five people and four of them told it wrong, and I told it wrong myself to a room of children and a girl of nine corrected me out of the book.

There is a parrot in it. Green, with a gold collar. He is kept in a cage because he is beautiful and because he can talk, and he is fed by hand, and when the birds ask him to come he says: I do not want your king. I want the water of Khizr, the water that means a man does not die. **I want more of this.**

And the hoopoe tells him he is asking for the wrong thing beautifully, and that a man who is willing to die can find that water, and a man

who only wants not to die will never get anywhere near it.

You have mistaken your keeper for your life.

I have been extremely good at not dying. Six coats and six exits and a count I could not stop keeping, and I have never once carried a weapon because a weapon makes you slow, and I have called all of that a life.

I am fifty. There is about twenty years in it, less the stone.

She has my number.

+98 —

Glossary

Pronunciation is given as plain English syllables; the syllable in CAPITALS carries the stress.

Attar [at-TAAR] — Farid ud-Din Attar of Neyshabur, c. 1145–c. 1221, Persian poet and apothecary; the name means *perfumer, druggist*. Author of *Manteq al-Tayr*.

ejraiyeḥ [ej-raa-ee-YEH] — Persian/Arabic, *writ of execution*. The order that permits enforcement of a judgment. The most frightening word in the language to anybody who has not had it explained.

esfand [es-FAND] — Persian; the seed of wild rue, burned on coals against the evil eye. Its crackle is recognised by every Iranian.

Khizr [KHEZR] — the green one; the immortal guide of Islamic tradition who drank from the Water of Life and walks the earth still, appearing to travellers in difficulty and vanishing. What the parrot wants.

Manteq al-Tayr [man-TEGH ot-TAYR] — Arabic, *The Speech of the Birds*, known in English as *The Conference of the Birds*. Attar's poem of c. 1177, in which the birds of the world set out across seven valleys to find their king, the Simorgh, and each first gives an excuse for not going. Their guide is the hoopoe. It is taught in Iranian schools.

Panjshanbeh [panj-shan-BEH] — Persian, *Thursday*, literally *the fifth day*. The night families gather, and the night families visit their dead.

qanat [gha-NAAT] — Arabic via Persian, *channel*. A hand-dug tunnel bringing water by gravity from an aquifer to a settlement.

sabt-e ahvāl [SABT-e ah-VAAL] — Persian, *registration of conditions*. The civil registry: the office that holds every birth, death, marriage and divorce in the country, in bound books, on shelves. Your existence is in that building.

sayyid [saa-YED] — Arabic, *lord, master*. A descendant of the Prophet through his daughter Fatimah, marked by the black turban. It can be inherited and cannot be conferred.

Simorgh [see-MORGH] — Persian, from Middle Persian *senmurw*. The great bird of Persian myth; in the Shahnameh the protector of Zal, and in Attar the king the birds go to find.

sowgand [sow-GAND] — Persian, *oath*. Where documentary evidence runs out, the court may put the matter to a sworn statement, which decides it.

toman [toh-MAAN] — from the Mongolian *tūmen*, ten thousand. The unit Iranians count in, equal to ten rials.

Vakilabad [va-keel-aa-BAAD] — District of Mashhad, and the name of its principal prison.

A woman rings at twenty past eight in the morning, which is not when she rings. She was his wife for seven years and she has known exactly what he is since she recognised him across a rented hall in four seconds, and she has never once used the word.

There is no crime in this book. A document exists and it is genuine — the signature is real and the debt was real — and what is false is a circumstance that nine or ten people understood in 1391 and nobody wrote down, because you do not ask your brother for a receipt. Every one of those people is dead or in Sweden.

Except one. And the one is a man with no papers in any name, wanted in three provinces, who obtained the information by telephone four years ago while impersonating a doctor, and who is the girl's father.

Eleven months of corridors, one operating table, and a single long administrative afternoon in Branch 4 with a house in it. Where the documents run out, our courts may put the matter to an oath, and that oath is not evidence toward a decision — it is the decision.

"He put his hand on the Book in a dead man's coat and told the entire truth."

A painting of a long, dimly lit corridor. Rows of wooden chairs are arranged on both sides of a tiled floor. A bright beam of light enters from a window at the far end, creating a strong contrast. On the right wall, a round clock is visible. In the foreground, a cup of tea sits on one of the chairs. On the right, a stack of books or papers is on a table.

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