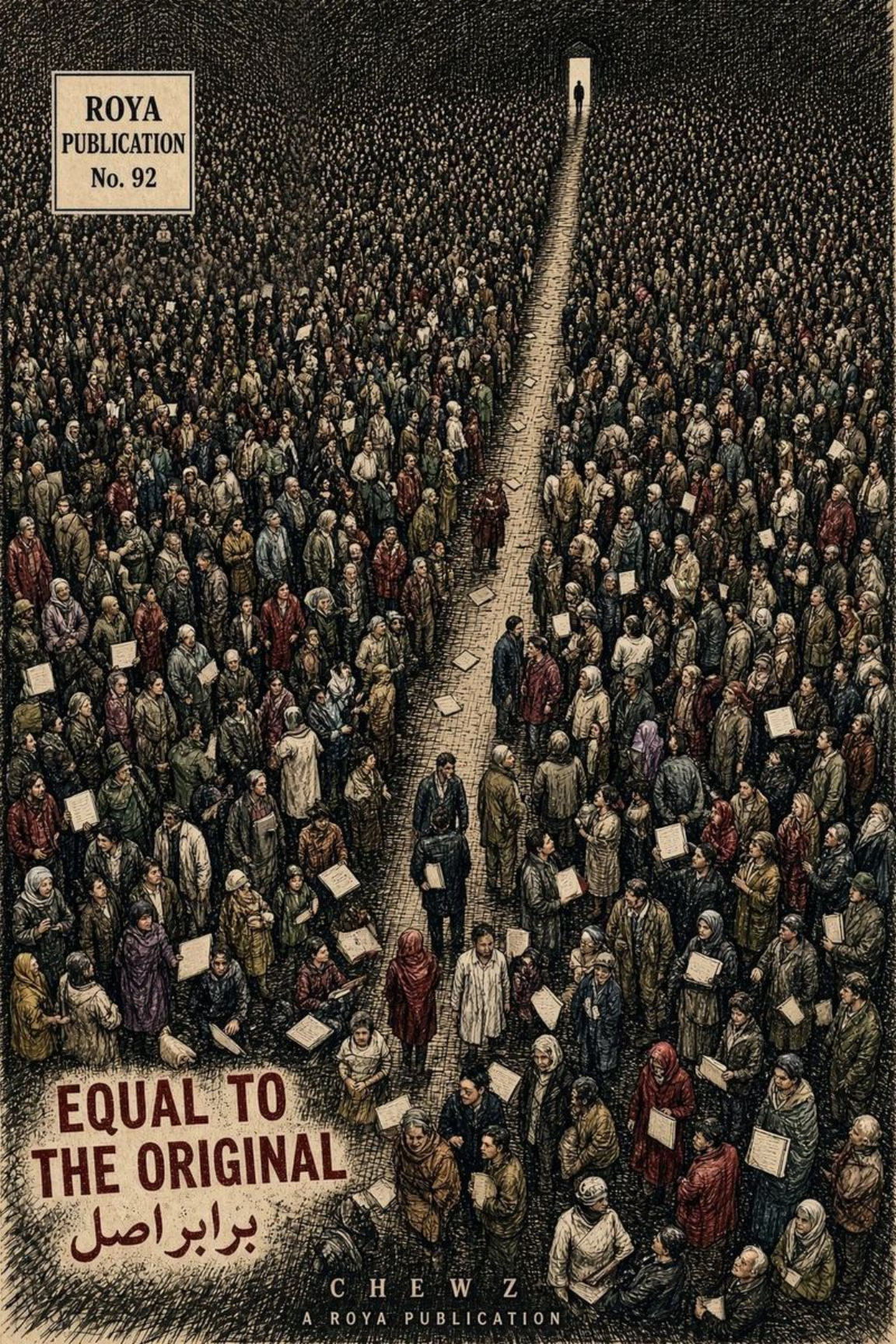




ROYA
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No. 92

**EQUAL TO
THE ORIGINAL**
برابراصل

C H E W Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

EQUAL TO THE ORIGINAL

برابر اصل

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 92

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

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SURVEY OF EARNED DOCTORATES · UNITED STATES · 2018–2024

*Of 5,683 Iranian citizens who took a doctorate on a temporary visa,
91.7 per cent reported that they intended to stay.*

No country sending more than two thousand is higher.

U.S. NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION
NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING STATISTICS

For the ones who stayed.

SYNOPSIS

Mahin is fifty-two and she has been a sworn translator for twenty years. Every emigration file that leaves that country crosses her desk, and her seal is the last Iranian mark on it — something over thirty thousand of them, and she has read perhaps forty. She works from the reference number on the docket and never from the name in the box beside it. She taught herself years ago not to look at that box. It is a real discipline and she is right to be proud of it.

She also has a theory, and she is the only person alive placed to have it, because she is the only one who sees the files in order and in clusters. People do not leave because of the conditions. They leave because somebody near them left. The first departure in a circle does nothing. The second is noticed. The third reclassifies everybody still standing there — the moment the third one goes, the ones remaining stop being people who stayed and become people who failed to leave.

Which means the inverse holds. If leaving is contagious then so is staying, and the thing that holds a person in place is never an argument and never a salary. It is one specific person, visibly staying, nearby.

So she keeps them. A grant, small, arriving in the week somebody has worked out that they cannot afford both the clearance and the rent. A job, not given but found, through a woman whose husband's brother knows somebody. A flat held empty for six years and lent to fourteen people. And a fourth thing she has never described to anybody, which is that some files take twenty months instead of four — which is not a refusal, and cannot be appealed, and is indistinguishable from weather.

Nine hundred and four people are still in that country who would not otherwise be, and almost every one of them will tell you they thought about going and decided against it.

Equal to the Original is told in forty-nine entries, each one headed by a document she has stamped. On the first of the month she reads down the fourth column, releases the files that have reached their term, and squares the drawer afterwards. One of them will not lie flat. She turns it over to straighten the fastening, and the name is on the front of the docket, on the right, in the box she does not look at.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is for the ones who stayed. It does not know why they did, and that is the reason it exists.

Almost every figure for Iranian emigration is contested, so here is the one shape that is not. Around 1979, surveys of Iranian students in the United States found that nine in ten intended to come home. By 2017, among Iranians taking doctorates there, the share saying so was in single figures. What changed in those years was not the conditions — conditions have been bad for a long time in a great many places and people have gone home to them anyway. What changed was the expectation of return. A country can survive its people leaving. It cannot survive its people ceasing to imagine coming back.

The hardest part of this to write was the parents, because they are neither villains nor fools. A mother and father who have watched a currency eat thirty years of correct behaviour, and who look across a table at a clever child, do the arithmetic anyone would do. They want the child to have a life and they are right. And the mechanism by which they are right is that each of them, acting reasonably and separately and out of love, removes one more reason for the next family to stay. Nobody in that chain does anything wrong. That is what a tragedy is, and it is why this book is not angry with anybody in it.

I should say where I am standing. I left. I had the paperwork and I had the final stamp, and the stamp is not a formality: it is the whole difference between a departure and a wish. The Iranians you meet abroad are not a sample of anything except the people who managed it.

So the question this book is for is the other one — not why people go, but why anybody stays who could leave. Almost nobody writes about them, because a person who does not do something is not a story. What the book proposes, and it is a proposal rather than a finding, is that staying is not a decision taken once. It is taken every morning by somebody who has stopped counting, and the

thing that holds a person in place is never a reason. It is another person, standing nearby, also staying. If that is true then hope was never a feeling. It is a structure, it is made of other people, and it can be built — which means it can also be built badly, by somebody who means well, and that is the story this book tells.

One figure is printed here, on the plate at the front, with the body that published it named beside it: of the 5,683 Iranian citizens who took a doctorate in the United States on a temporary visa between 2018 and 2024, 91.7 per cent reported that they intended to stay. It measures intention, stated at graduation, to remain in the United States — not what anybody did afterwards. I have kept the survey's own verb. And one figure is not printed, because everybody else prints it: it is widely said that ninety-five per cent of Iran's olympiad medallists have left, and that has no source, while the only real count I could find says 56.6 per cent of them still live there. I would rather print the number that is true than the one that suits me.

The rest is documented or invented, and here is which. The conditions are documented and I invented none of them. The chain is real, and each office in it authenticates the stamp before it rather than anything anybody wrote — and there are two stamps, which I had wrong until I was corrected: one certifies that a translation conforms to its original, and *barābar bā asl*, a copy equal with the original, says that a photocopy matches the paper it was made from. I had the clearance wrong as well; it is issued in a day, and what burns is the other end, where no receiving country will look at one more than six months old. Two systems, two clocks, no view of each other, and nobody in it to be angry with. The crossing is built from one published first-hand account and every particular of it is his, not mine, and I have not used his name. Everything else is invented — the woman, the son, the office, the foundation, the nine hundred. No person in this book is a real person, and the one document in it that I have held in my own hand is the stamp.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. THE CHAIN	10
II. THE FOUNDATION	28
III. THE ANCHOR	46
IV. NINETEEN DAYS	62

I. THE CHAIN

1.

BIRTH CERTIFICATE · SHAHRUD · 1379

Father's occupation: none stated.

I have two stamps and I am going to begin with what they actually claim, because everybody takes both of them for formalities and neither one is.

The first goes at the foot of a translation and it says that the translation conforms to the original. The second is for foreign papers and it says *a copy equal with the original*. Between them I have put one or the other on something over thirty thousand documents.

Neither of them says the document is true. Neither says anything whatever about whether the boy was born in Shahrud, or whether his father had an occupation, or whether there was a father. One says the page I have written and the page in front of me agree. The other says the page in front of me and a page somewhere else are the same page.

Twenty years, two stamps, and not one word in either of them about whether anything happened.

I am not a witness to anybody's life. I am a witness to a resemblance.

That is the whole of the profession and I have been doing it for twenty years. My licence hangs in a frame behind my desk where nobody looks at it, and the seal itself lives in the second drawer, and it is a small brass thing about the weight of an egg, and it is the most valuable object I own. Not sentimentally. A flat can be sold twice in a decade and be worth less each time. That seal has been worth exactly the same thing since the day they gave it to me, which is a door.

People are sentimental about the wrong parts of this work. They think the skill is the languages. The skill is the wording — that there is one correct English form for every Persian form, that it was settled by people I never met, and that a document translated well is a document nobody notices. The best work I have ever done is

invisible by design. If a clerk in another country pauses over one of my pages for even a second, I have failed.

There is a man in this trade I have not spoken to since 1389 because of a letter. Not a letter in the postal sense — a letter of the alphabet. He renders one particular consonant his way and I render it mine, and both are permitted, and the tables allow both, and each of us has been doing it his own way for twenty years. There are now several thousand people abroad whose surnames disagree with their cousins' surnames depending on which of us was at the desk that week.

We were friends. It was not the letter that ended it. It was that he was asked, at a gathering, in front of colleagues, which of the two forms was standard — and he answered.

I have considered apologising. I have got as far as composing it. The obstacle is that I would have to concede the letter.

Thirty thousand of them. I could tell you what a police clearance from Kermanshah looks like from across a room.

And of those thirty thousand I have read perhaps forty.

2.

CERTIFICATE OF NO CRIMINAL RECORD • TEHRAN

Not accepted if issued more than six months before the date of application.

I should explain how a file actually reaches me, because people imagine somebody walks in with a shoebox and sits down across from me and tells me their story, and it has not worked that way since before I started.

Files arrive in bundles. An agency takes a client, or a notary does, or one of the little bureaux near the ministry with a laminated sign and two chairs. They assemble the documents, they make the copies, they clip them, and a boy on a motorcycle brings me twenty or thirty at a time in a plastic envelope with a docket on the front. Each one has a reference number. Not a name — a number,

because the agency has the name, and the agency is the one being paid by the person, and I am being paid by the agency.

I do the work and the boy comes back on the Thursday and takes them away.

The boy has been the boy for thirteen years and is thirty-four. I called him the boy for so long that when he told me his name somewhere in the third year I did not retain it, and it is now far too late to ask, and he knows this, and has taken to signing the docket with an initial that could be any of four letters. He has views about the one-way system and shares them. He is the only person in the whole chain who has met everybody else in it.

And there is a chain, and I am at the top of it, and the top is not where people think. After me a file goes to the Ministry of Justice, which does not certify the document — it certifies *me*. Then to Foreign Affairs, which certifies the Ministry of Justice. Then to an embassy, which certifies Foreign Affairs. Three queues in three parts of the city, in that order, each one authenticating the stamp before it rather than anything anybody actually wrote. The trade word for it is legalisation, which is a strange word for a process in which nothing is examined.

So I am not the last Iranian signature on a file, which is what I used to tell people at dinners. I am the last one that *says* anything. Everybody after me is only confirming that I exist.

In twenty years I have met perhaps two hundred applicants in person, and almost all of them were people who came because something had gone wrong and somebody had told them to take it to the translator directly. So the ones I have met are not a sample of anything except failure.

This matters and I want it understood early. I am the narrowest part of a long pipe. Everything the country loses passes through eighteen inches of desk in my office, and I do not see faces, and I do not see arrivals. What happens to anybody afterwards is not mine to know, and in twenty years I have found out about perhaps a dozen of them, always by accident and always from somebody else.

What I see is paper going one way.

And there is another road, and I am not on it.

I want that said early, because everything in this account happens on mine and mine is not the only one. A file costs money before it reaches me. An agency, a bureau, a notary, a clearance fee, a medical, a verification, my fee, three ministries, an embassy, a ticket — and the whole of that assumes eight or nine months in which somebody in the household is still earning.

So the people who come through my office are not the desperate. *They are the capable.* Everything I see is the departure of people who had the means to do it correctly, which is a particular slice of a country and not the poorest slice and not the most frightened one.

There is another road along the top of the country that does not involve paper at all, and I will come to it, and the only part of it I have ever been able to put down anywhere it would sit quietly is the price.

A crossing costs less than an application.

The clearance at the top of this page is the cruellest document in the trade, and it is cruel arithmetically rather than politically.

Our side issues it quickly. That is the joke and nobody in the trade has ever found it funny: of everything this country does, the certificate that says you have not been convicted of anything is the one thing it will do for you in an afternoon, from a telephone, for the price of a taxi. The other side is where the arithmetic is. They will not look at one more than six months old — some of them want three — and inside that window the file has to be translated, sealed, carried to Justice, carried to Foreign Affairs, carried to an embassy, and then seen by somebody at the embassy, and an appointment at an embassy is given out months ahead.

So the six months burn whether or not anything is moving. If any part of it is late the certificate is dead on arrival, and a dead certificate is not a delay, it is a rebuild: new fee, new attestations, new everything that referenced it, and every date in the file re-timed against a document that did not exist when the file was assembled.

Nobody designed that. It is two offices in two countries with two rules and no view of each other.

Two floors below me there is a notary whose stamp several of my documents need before mine can go on them, which means my Thursdays are governed by another man's lunch. He takes an hour and forty minutes. He has taken an hour and forty minutes since I moved into this building. I have never raised it and I never will, because the one time I hurried him he became careful, and a careful notary is a catastrophe.

And somewhere across the city there is an office that verifies degrees. It has a telephone. The telephone is answered on Wednesdays, sometimes, by a man whose name nobody knows and who is unfailingly helpful, and the entire profession is aware of him, and in twenty years not one of us has established what he does there or why only Wednesdays. We speak about him the way sailors speak about a current.

3.

ACADEMIC TRANSCRIPT · SHAHID BEHESHTI

Cumulative average: 18.42.

I stopped reading names in the fourth year.

I want to be accurate about how it happened, because I have heard it described since as a kind of coldness and it was not. It was speed. When there are thirty of them on the desk and they all go back on the Thursday, the name is the least useful thing on the page; it does not need translating, it needs transliterating, and there is a table for that, and after a while your hand does the table without asking you.

So the name became a shape. Then it became a task. And somewhere in there I noticed that the days I did not read the names were easier than the days I did, and I noticed that I had noticed, and I did not look at it any harder than that.

You must understand what the alternative is. A transcript with an average of eighteen point four two on it is a person who did not

sleep for four years, and if I let myself see that, and then sealed it, and then watched the boy put it in the plastic envelope, I would be doing a different job with the same hands.

So there is a discipline, and it is a real discipline and other translators have their own versions of it, and mine is this: I work from the reference number. The number is on the docket, the number goes in my ledger, the number comes back on the Thursday. I certify what is in front of me and I do not ask whose it is.

For twenty years I believed this was professional rigour. I have had cause to revisit it.

Every translator I know who reads the names has left the trade, or refuses work, or has begun putting right things that were not hers to put right. The discipline is not a moral failing. It is what allows the work to be done at all.

Which is also, of course, exactly the problem.

4.

MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE · REGISTRY 214, TEHRAN · 1373

Mahriyeh: one hundred and ten gold coins.

I work at night. Not by preference — by arithmetic. The bundles come in the afternoon, the boy wants them on Thursday, and a page takes what it takes.

The office has one lamp that matters, a green one, and there is a particular hour, somewhere past midnight, when the traffic on the avenue stops being individual cars and becomes a sound, and the work changes. In the day you translate. After that hour you transcribe: the hand moves and the sentences come out already in English and you are not entirely present for it.

Everybody in this trade knows that hour and nobody writes it down, so I am writing it down. It is the most productive part of the day and it is also where the harm is, and it took me two decades to understand that those are the same fact.

Because the thing about the documents is the person. Not the person on the page — the *grammatical* person. Every statement of intent, every affidavit, every personal declaration is written in the first person, and so to render it I must say it in the first person, in my own head, in two languages, one after the other.

I was born in. I have never been convicted of. I am not married. I have sufficient funds. I intend to return.

Thirty thousand times, in the evenings, with the flat quiet and the door shut.

There is an effect from that, and it is smaller than it sounds. I have a memory of a room in Hamburg. A high window, a radiator under it that knocked twice and then settled, a courtyard with bicycles chained along the far wall. It is as detailed as any memory I own and I have never been to Hamburg. In the seventh year I rendered a landlord's letter describing that room, for a sponsor, and at some point in the two decades since, the room was filed with mine.

Everybody in this trade has one. A woman I studied with can taste a soup she has never eaten and knows exactly whose grandmother made it.

Thirty thousand times. In a green lamp, after midnight, alone.

You can do that for a year and it is a job. You can do it for five and it is a trade. I do not know what it is at twenty, and I would like to say that I noticed something going wrong, and I did not, because what it feels like from the inside is competence.

The marriage certificate above is from the year I married, from a different registry than mine, and I have translated four hundred of them, and I can tell you that a hundred and ten is not a number anybody arrived at by feeling. It is the number the law will still compel a man over, and above it the law stops compelling and starts asking politely whether he can afford it. And I can tell you the other thing, which nobody expects: it is the one promise made to a woman in this country that is worth more now than on the day it was made, because it is written in gold and gold does not care what is happening to the rial. Everything else in a marriage contract has been eaten. That has not. A woman married in the

year I was married is walking around with the only figure in her life that held.

5.

RESIDENCE CERTIFICATE · DISTRICT 6, TEHRAN

Occupants: three.

Three of us in the flat. My mother in the back room with the good window, because she is eighty-one and because it was her flat before it was mine. Arash in the small room. Me in the front, where the desk is, because I gave up a bedroom for a desk twelve years ago and have never regretted it once.

My mother requires four medicines and two of them are the sort you queue for. That is nearly the whole of her presence in this account until the end, and I want to be honest that this is how she is present in my life as well: as a list of hours. Nine, one, six, nine. I love her and I have organised her into a timetable, and I do not know what else I was supposed to do.

Arash is twenty-six. He worked downstairs from me, more or less — he worked for the thing I had built, which I will come to — and we had the arrangement that two adults have when they share four rooms, which is that we knew each other's sounds. I knew when he was reading and when he was pretending to read. He knew that I take the second cup of tea at eleven and not before.

He is easy, my son. That is the word for him. He is not sharp the way I was sharp and he is not ambitious in any direction I recognise, and for a long time I was quietly disappointed by that and then I stopped being, because I watched a hundred sharp people burn and he did not burn.

People would say to me: you are lucky, he stayed.

I would say: he has no reason to go. Which is a different sentence, and I said it for two years without once hearing it.

6.

DEGREE CERTIFICATE · AMIRKABIR · 1384

Field of study: mechanical engineering.

The first time I saw it was the sixth year and it was an accident of filing.

Three bundles came in the same week from the same bureau, and because the bureau was careless they had not been separated properly, and I found myself certifying three degree certificates from the same faculty, the same year, the same field.

The bureau in question is near the ministry and has a laminated sign, two chairs and a photocopier, and is run by a man who has never once in all the years since spelled a client's name the same way twice inside the same bundle. I have raised it. He agrees with me warmly every time. Nothing changes. Half my corrections in a given year are his, and I have stopped thinking of him as a colleague and started thinking of him as weather. That happens. What made me stop was the fourth, which came nine days later, and which was from the same street.

Not the same faculty. The same street.

I went back through the ledger. It took me a Friday. And what I found was that the four of them were not a coincidence and were not a cohort — they were a *circle*. They knew each other. I could not have proved it and I have never been able to prove it, but a person who has handled thirty thousand documents can read an address the way a doctor reads a cough.

And the order was the thing. The first one had gone eighteen months before. The second, nine months after him. The third and fourth came inside the same season.

I sat with that for a long time and then I did what I do, which is that I started keeping a second ledger. Not of names. Of districts, and of months.

Nobody asked me to do it. There was no purpose to it. I have thought since about why a woman of thirty-eight with a mother and a son and a full desk starts keeping a private record of other

people's departures in a notebook she does not show anybody, and the honest answer is the one I like least, which is that I already knew something and wanted to be proved wrong.

7.

PERSONAL STATEMENT · UNDATED

I wish to continue my studies abroad because the facilities here are limited.

Here is what the second ledger says, and it took me six years to be sure of it, and I have never told anybody but my son.

People do not leave because of the conditions.

I know how that sounds. The conditions are real; I am not an idiot and I am not a patriot. The money halves, the water goes, the air in Dey is a thing you are inside of, and every single person who leaves will tell you these are the reasons, and will believe it, and will produce a personal statement like the one above that says *the facilities here are limited*, which is true and which is not why.

Because the conditions are the same on the street where nobody goes and on the street where everybody does. I have both streets in the notebook. The conditions cannot be the cause of a thing they are equally present for.

What actually moves is this. Somebody in your circle goes. The first one does nothing — you are pleased for him, you help with the boxes, you feel briefly superior. The second is noticed; there is a silence at a table that was not there before. And then the third goes.

The third one is the one that does it, and it is not because three is a magic number. It is because at three the arithmetic in the room reverses. Up to two, you are a person who has stayed. At three, you become a person who has failed to leave. Nobody says this. Nobody has to. It arrives in the way people ask you what you are doing these days.

After the third, the rest go within about two years, and they go one after another, and every one of them writes *the facilities here are limited*.

8.

**APPLICATION FOR CERTIFIED TRANSLATION · REFERENCE
11-4472**

Enclosures: four.

He asked me about it in Aban, in the kitchen, while I was standing up.

He said: any news?

I said there was no news, which was true. I said that these things take the time they take. I said — and I remember the whole of this, because I have gone over it perhaps two hundred times since, and because at the time it was the least remarkable thirty seconds of my week — I said that the ones who chase a file always do worse than the ones who wait, because chasing makes you look desperate and a desperate applicant gets read differently, and that the best thing he could do was leave it alone and let the system work.

He said: khob [KHOB] — well, then; all right.

And then he asked whether we had the bread from the good place or the other place, and I said the other place, and he said that was fine.

I want that conversation on the page exactly as it happened, with nothing added to it, because there is a version of this account in which I make it heavy and put something in his face, and there was nothing in his face. He asked. I answered. He ate.

We had that conversation, or near enough to it, once or twice a month for two years.

Every time he asked, I told him the truth as I understood it. I have gone looking for the lie in it and there isn't one. That is the part I would like somebody to explain to me, because I have now spent a long time with the idea that a person can say nothing false for two years and still be the thing that happened to their own child.

These things move when they move. That is what I told him. I said it kindly. I believed it.

9.

DECLARATION OF SUPPORT · TORONTO

Relationship of sponsor to applicant: cousin.

What a departure does to the people who remain is not grief. I want to be precise, because grief is a respectable thing and this is not.

It is a demotion.

A family of four becomes a family of three and one address abroad, and for about six months that address is an achievement. They mention it. The mother says *my daughter in Toronto* in the way you would say *my daughter the surgeon*. And then the calls thin, not from coldness but from time zones and from the sheer labour of building a life, and at some point in the second year the sentence *my daughter in Toronto* stops meaning an achievement and starts meaning an absence, and nobody in the room can say which month it turned.

And underneath, the thing nobody says at all: the ones left behind have been reclassified without being consulted.

I have seen this in the documents, which is a strange place to see it. An affidavit of support is a form in which somebody abroad promises to be financially responsible for somebody here. It is a generous document. It is also a document in which a cousin becomes a guarantor, and a guarantor is above the person guaranteed, and every family I have processed this for has had the same small sickness afterwards — the tone of the calls, the way the word *help* starts being used, the way a man of fifty starts describing his own son as *doing well over there* in a voice with a floor under it.

They asked for nothing. Nobody did anything wrong. The relation changed anyway, because the one who left has a currency and the one who stayed has a salary.

I can tell you the size of that gap because I convert it every week without meaning to. A young man sends his mother the price of one unremarkable dinner where he is, and it settles her utilities for a season. He does not experience this as power and she does not experience it as charity, and they are both wrong, and the proof that they are wrong is that neither of them will ever say the figure out loud to the other.

What it does to a household is not resentment. It is quieter than resentment and it does more damage. It is that from then on every discussion in that house about anything at all — the car, the roof, whether the grandmother sees the specialist — has a person in it who is not in the room, who does not know he is in it, and who cannot be argued with.

10.

DEATH CERTIFICATE · BEHESHT-E ZAHRA

Cause: stated on reverse.

They come back for two reasons.

The first is a death, and I certify those as well — in the other direction, documents going in rather than out, and there are far fewer of them and they are the only work in this trade that is not about the future. A man in Hamburg needs his mother's death certificate rendered into German so that an office there will accept that he is now nobody's son. I did one in the fourteenth year that had a note on it in a hand I recognised, because I had certified the woman's marriage certificate twelve years earlier, and I sat with that for a while and then I did the work.

The second is that they come back to visit and stay two weeks and leave.

I used to watch for the third reason. In my first years I genuinely expected it — that some of them would simply return, having tried it and found it wanting, and would need their foreign degrees rendered into Persian so that a ministry here would recognise them. There is a form for it. It exists. I have the wording.

I have done nine.

Nine, in twenty years, against thirty thousand going the other way, and of those nine, four came back for a parent and two came back because a marriage ended, and I will not speculate about the rest.

Everybody writes *I intend to return* on the statement. It is on the form. It is expected, and it is the correct thing to write, and it costs nothing to write it.

Nine.

There is also a fourth category, which I do not see and have to be told about.

People who stop waiting. There is a road through the north-west and there is a price on it and it requires no clearance, no verification, no medical and no translator, and the people who take it are not the poorest people in this country. They are people who ran out of one particular thing, and it is almost never money. It is time, or it is a paper that will not issue.

I have been told about four of them in twenty years. Always second-hand. Always by somebody who was uncomfortable telling me and who watched my face while they said it.

And I have always answered the same way, which is that I hope it went well for them.

I have never asked one follow-up question. Not once, in twenty years. A woman who can identify a police clearance from Kermanshah across a room, and it has never occurred to me to ask what becomes of a person who cannot be issued one.

11.

TRANSLATOR'S LICENCE · MINISTRY OF JUSTICE · 1385

Holder: sworn this day.

I was thirty-two when they gave me the seal.

There is an examination and there is an interview and there is a period of waiting that has no stated length, and at the end of it you swear an oath, and the oath is short and almost entirely about

accuracy. Nothing in it is about consequence. I have looked. I have the wording in the frame behind me and there is not one word in it about what your accuracy will be used for.

People assume I took this work because I love languages. I do, adequately. The truth is that I took it because it was the only qualification I could complete in the evenings, and because it did not require me to leave the flat for long, and because in that year I needed a thing that was mine and was portable and could not be taken away by anybody's decision except my own.

Every woman I knew at that age was doing the same arithmetic in a different subject. The dentistry, the midwifery, the accountancy certificate, the teaching diploma taken at night with a baby asleep in the next room. We did not call it insurance and any of us would have been offended by the word. It was simply understood. A woman should have a thing of her own, and the thing should be one she can carry out of a building in a bag, and nobody in my mother's generation would have said why out loud and nobody in mine had to be told.

For most of the last twenty-five years there have been more women than men in the universities of that country, and every foreign article I have seen about it treats the fact as hopeful. It is not hopeful. It is a very large number of families making the same quiet calculation about what their daughter is going to need if things go badly, and *things going badly* is a category with a great deal in it.

I am not going to say more about that year in this part of the account. There is a reason I have a drawer at the back of my office that I do not open, and I am aware that a reader will have already decided what is in it, and a reader will be wrong about the details and right about the shape.

What I will say is that I chose a profession in which the entire point is that you do not decide anything. You render. Somebody else decides. I was thirty-two and I wanted very badly to be in a room where nothing was up to me.

It is the great joke of my life and I did not get to it until I was fifty-two.

12.

BUNDLE DOCKET · 30 ITEMS · THURSDAY COLLECTION

Twenty-nine returned.

The first time I held one back was in the ninth year and I have never been able to decide whether it was deliberate.

A girl's file — a reference number, I mean; I did not know she was a girl until much later and I should not have known then. It came in a bundle of thirty and I did twenty-nine of them and the thirtieth was still on the desk when the boy came, and I said, this one is not finished, take the rest. Which was not true. It was finished. It was sitting under my hand and it was finished and I said that sentence and the boy shrugged and went down the stairs.

I have gone back to that Thursday a great many times. There was a reason. The reason was that the bundle had come from a bureau on a street that was in my second ledger, and that the ledger said this street had already sent two, and that I had put the notebook down forty minutes earlier having just written the sentence about the third.

So I knew what she was. I did not know who she was. I knew what she was *to the street*, and I held her for nine weeks, and at the end of the nine weeks I certified it and sent it on and she went anyway, four months later than she would have.

Nothing happened. Nobody noticed. There is no mechanism by which anybody could have noticed, because a file that takes four months longer is a file that takes four months longer, and this is a country where that sentence explains everything and is never questioned by anyone.

The agency did telephone, once, in the sixth week. I said the sentence I have said to agencies since the second year of my working life and had never once said dishonestly.

These things move when they move.

It went on being true while I said it. That is the thing about it. Not one word in it had to be altered to make it do the new work, and I

did not notice that at the time, because I was busy noticing that I had not lied.

I remember thinking, that evening, with my hand still on it: *well, that is available.*

And then I went home and did not think about it again for four years.

II. THE FOUNDATION

13.

BUNDLE DOCKET · 26 ITEMS · THURSDAY COLLECTION

Twenty-five returned.

Four years, and I did not do it again.

I want that on the record because it is the part that makes the rest of it worse. It was not a habit that crept. There was a Thursday in the ninth year, and then there were four years of ordinary work in which I did not hold anything back from anybody, and then there was a Thursday in the thirteenth.

In between I had thought about it perhaps twice a year. Not guiltily. The way you think about a room in a building you no longer work in.

Those four years were the best working years I have had, and I am going to say so, because a person reading this will want the whole of my life to have had the shape of a warning and it did not have that shape at all.

I did the work. A family from Karaj who needed six copies of a death certificate and wept over the sixth and not the first. A man of seventy who brought me his own birth certificate to be rendered into English and could not tell me what for, and it came out that his granddaughter had asked him for it and he had not wanted to ask her why. Nine school transcripts in one week, all from the same girls' school, all for the same country, all in the same hand because one teacher had signed the lot.

I noticed that. I wrote it in the notebook.

I did nothing about it, and I did not at that time think of myself as a woman who might.

What changed was that the second ledger got long enough to be an instrument.

Seven years of districts and months, in a notebook with a soft cover, and at some point in the thirteenth year I stopped being a woman who had noticed a pattern and became a woman who could use one. I could open the book and say: this street has sent two in fourteen months, and the third is somewhere in this month's

bundles, and if the third goes then by the spring after next there will be nine.

Nine. Out of one street.

And the thing about being able to say that is that you cannot stop being able to say it. It is not a thought you can decline to have. Every Thursday afterwards I was holding a plastic envelope containing, among other things, an arithmetic I could do and nobody else in the country could.

I held the twenty-sixth item that Thursday and I knew exactly why I was doing it, and I put it in the second drawer, under the seal, and I went home and ate with my mother and my son and slept without difficulty.

That is the entry. There is no scene in it. It was a Thursday.

14.

UTILITY ACCOUNT · SATTARKHAN · IN THE NAME OF THE LANDLORD

Occupant is not the account holder.

I should explain how a street is read, because it is the only skill I have that is genuinely mine and I have never been able to teach it to anybody, including my son, who tried.

You do not read people. There is nothing in a file about who a person knows. What you have is an address, a bureau, a year of birth, a field of study and a date of lodgement, and out of those five things you build a shape.

Two people from the same street with the same bureau in the same season is nothing; that is a bureau doing its job, and the bureau is probably somebody's cousin. Two from the same street with different bureaux, four months apart, in different fields — that is a circle. They are not using the same agent. They are sitting in somebody's kitchen and saying: I used a woman on Karim Khan and she was fine.

The utility account above is the document that taught me the most and it is not even a document about a person. It is a bill for a flat, in

the landlord's name, and the applicant needs it to prove she lives where she says. I have handled thousands. And the thing about a rented flat in that city is the turnover — so when I see three applications in eighteen months with three different names on three different bills for the *same address*, I am not looking at three neighbours. I am looking at one room that young people pass through, and somebody in it is telling the next one where to go.

Find the room and you can predict the street.

And the bills tell you the other thing, which is what kind of year the country is having.

I have handled this document for twenty years and I can date a decade off it. A utility account used to be a formality — a page you produced to prove an address, and nobody read the figures. Now half of them arrive with arrears printed across the third line, and the arrears are not a character flaw. They are what happens when a bill goes up while the service goes down.

Two days a week of water in some districts. Four hours of no power in the afternoon, in Tir, which also means no lift, which means the old woman on the fifth floor is in her flat until evening whether she intended to be or not, because the pump and the lift and the light run off the same supply and losing one loses all three.

None of that appears in any application. There is no field on any form in the world for it, and no clerk in a consulate in Europe would know what to do with one if there were.

What there is, on the form, is a young person of twenty-six who has quietly done the arithmetic on thirty more years of it.

I have never once been wrong about a room. I have been wrong about almost everything else in this account.

15.

WILL AND TESTAMENT · CERTIFIED COPY · GOTHENBURG

Residue to be applied in Tehran at the discretion of my cousin.

The money came from a dead man I never met, and the sum was not large, and I have wondered for years whether the whole of my life since is the result of a clerical vagueness.

He had gone in the eighties. Somewhere northern and cold. He left a will with a clause in it that said the remainder was to be applied in Tehran at his cousin's discretion, and the cousin was seventy-three and did not want the discretion, and the cousin's daughter had been through my office two years earlier and remembered me as somebody sensible.

So a woman I had never met came up my stairs and asked whether I knew anybody who needed help.

I said I would think about it. I thought about it for nine days.

Those nine days are worth setting down, because they are the last nine days in which I was an ordinary person, and nothing whatever about them felt like anything.

What a person does with money in that country, if they have any and did not steal it, is one of about four things, and everybody knows the list without being taught it. You give it to a hospital and it becomes a wing with a family's name over the door. You give it to a mosque and it becomes something you can point at. You put it into a marriage — somebody's daughter, somebody's deposit — which is the commonest of the four and is not thought of as charity at all, only as what money is for. Or you keep it moving quietly among people you know, in small amounts, at the new year and after a funeral and when somebody's father is ill, and nobody counts it and nobody is thanked anywhere it can be heard.

The fourth one is the real one. It is a great part of the reason that country works at all, and it is entirely invisible from outside it, and nobody has ever put a figure on it because the transaction leaves no trace anywhere except in two people and one of them will deny it.

I had nine days and I chose the fourth, and I chose it on the right grounds, which is that the first three are visible and I have never in my life wanted to be visible.

Everything since came out of a decision taken carefully, for good reasons, by a sensible woman. I would like that noted before the rest of it.

What I did with the first of it was give four hundred thousand tomans [to-MAAN] to a young man whose file I had held. Not as compensation — he did not know I had held it, and he never found out, and I want to be exact that this was not conscience. I gave it to him because he had been about to go and had stopped, and I wanted to know whether a small amount of money at the right moment could be the reason somebody did not resume.

It could.

He is still here. He has a business with four people in it and one of them is his brother, and at Nowruz [now-ROOZ] he sends me something I do not need, every year, for seven years.

That is the sentence that ruined my life: it worked the first time. If it had failed I would have given the rest away to a hospital and gone back to my desk.

16.

EMPLOYMENT VERIFICATION • PRIVATE COMPANY, DISTRICT 2

Position: junior. Commenced: the month following.

What I built has no name. I have been asked and I have always said there is nothing to name, and that is the only clever thing I did in twenty years, because a thing with a name attracts a second thing with a name and then you are an organisation and organisations are visible.

What it is, in practice, is four kinds of act.

A grant, which is small and which arrives at the exact moment somebody has worked out that they cannot afford both the

clearance and the rent. This is the commonest and the cheapest and it does the most.

A job, which is not given but found — a call to somebody who owes me nothing but who will take a call, and a young person who arrives at an interview having been described in advance. I have made perhaps sixty of those calls. Nobody I have described has ever been refused, which tells you more about the country than about me.

A flat, which is one flat, which I have held empty for six years and lent to fourteen people in that time, and which I could have sold in the second year for enough to fund everything else twice over, and did not, because a person who needs an address next week does not need a fund.

And the fourth thing, which I will come to in the next entry, and which I have never described to anybody at all.

There is no application to any of this. There is no form. There is a woman on Karim Khan and you are taken to see her by somebody who was taken to see her, and that is the entire selection mechanism, and I have run it for seven years and thought it was humility.

There is a word for that mechanism and the word is *pārti* [PAAR-tee], from the English *party*, and it means having somebody. Everybody in that country uses it and everybody uses it bitterly, because *pārti* is the explanation for what the other person got. A bed in the good hospital. A licence. A place at the terminal. The whole country agrees that it is the sickness, and the whole country runs on it, and the two facts sit in the same mouth without ever being introduced to each other.

If you had asked me at any point in those twenty years I would have told you that what I do is the opposite of *pārti*. That *pārti* moves a person up a queue past somebody who was there first, and that I have never in my life moved anybody up anything.

That is true. I have had a month to look at it and it is still true.

What I have arrived at is that I did not move people up. I moved them down. And the reason there is no word for that is that until me there was nobody in a position to need one.

17.

LEDGER · PRIVATE · COLUMN FOUR

Entry: held.

The fourth thing is that I slow files down.

I have never refused anybody anything. I want that stated at the front of this entry and I want it understood that I still believe it matters, even now, even after everything, and that a distinction without a difference is not what it is.

A refusal is a decision made about a person, and it is visible, and it can be appealed, and it tells the person something true about their situation. What I do tells nobody anything. A file that takes twenty months instead of four is a file that took twenty months, in a country where that sentence is the answer to every question anybody has ever asked about anything. There is no appeal against weather.

The rules were mine and I made them early and I never broke one.

Never a refusal. Never a document destroyed or altered — every file I have ever held went out eventually, complete and correct and perfectly translated, because the work is the work.

Never more than two years. That one is the important one and I will say why in a moment.

And never a person. I choose from the second ledger, and the second ledger has no names in it. I select a shape — this street, this season, hold two — and the shapes come back to me as reference numbers on a docket, and I hold the numbers.

The two-year rule I put in for the obvious reason, which is that it is the only thing standing between what I do and something I would not be able to look at. Two years is a delay. Three is a life.

I have kept to it without exception for seven years, and every month I pull the numbers that have reached it and I let them go.

I built that rule to protect other people's children.

18.

DIPLOMA · NURSING · 1396

Awarded with distinction.

One of the good ones should go down properly here, coming where it does, after what I have just written and knowing how it will be read. It is true and it happened and she is alive and here.

She was twenty-two and she was going to Muscat, and the arithmetic was sound — it is always sound, that is the whole problem — and she had a sister who had gone two years before and an aunt in the same city who had gone in the nineties, and the street was one of mine. Third. She was the third.

I held her for nine months and in the seventh I found her a post at a private clinic that pays late and pays properly, and I gave her nothing else, and I never met her and I have never spoken to her.

She is twenty-nine now. She trains people. There are nineteen women working in this city tonight who were trained by a woman who had a ticket and a sister and a reason, and the whole of that exists because a file sat in a drawer for nine months and she got tired of waiting and took a job.

I have gone over this one a great many times in the last month, looking for the flaw, and the flaw is not in the outcome. The outcome is nineteen nurses.

The flaw is that I did that to her, and she does not know, and if I told her tomorrow she would have to decide what the last seven years had been, and I am not going to make her do that, which means I am also the person who has decided she will never find out.

19.

CENSUS FORM · DISTRICT 6 · HOUSEHOLD RETURN

Number of persons ordinarily resident: three.

Nine hundred and four.

That is the figure in the second ledger and I am confident in it to within about thirty, and the imprecision is at the edges — people I held once, briefly, for a season, where I could not tell you afterwards whether it made any difference.

Nine hundred people who are in this country and who would not be, and who do not know, and who will say if you ask them that they thought about going and decided against it.

That sentence used to be the best thing in my life, and it was not a cold thing to carry. It was the warmest thing I have ever had. I would be in a taxi in traffic on the expressway and look at the cars and think: some of these. I would be at a wedding and count.

I do not think a person raised somewhere that works can be made to understand what that was worth. Where I live, every public good is somebody's arrangement. The road was built by a man who took a third of it. The clinic is good because of who the director's brother is. There is not one large thing you can point at and say, that was done honestly and it is still standing. So a private good that nobody can see is the only kind anybody trusts, and it is the only currency in the country that has not been devalued, and everybody I know keeps a small hoard of it and takes it out at night and looks at it.

Mine was nine hundred people.

I would like to be able to tell you that the size of it frightened me. It did not. A woman with four is being kind. A woman with nine hundred has a practice, and I got there by adding one at a time, which is how nobody has ever noticed what they were becoming.

And I never once told anybody, which I put down at the time to modesty and which I now understand was the correct instinct arriving with the wrong explanation attached. I did not tell anybody

because there was nobody I could have told who would have agreed with me.

There were nine hundred and four of them and there were three of us in the flat, and I did not do the arithmetic that was available, which was that the number of people whose lives I had privately redirected was three hundred times the number of people who knew what I did all day.

20.

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION · UNDATED · UNSIGNED

To whom it may concern.

Arash came to work for me in the spring, and it was not a plan, and it is the ordinary way it happens with a son.

He had finished and he had the degree and there was nothing, which is not a complaint about him; there was nothing for anybody. So he began doing the driving, and then the telephoning, and then within a year he was the one who met the young people, because he was better at it than I have ever been. They talked to him. They did not talk to me; they were polite to me and grateful and slightly afraid, and they talked to him on the stairs on the way out.

He would come back up with things I could not have got. Who was pregnant. Who was lying about the sister in Vancouver. Who had already sold the car.

Early on he asked me what to say when one of them stopped him on the stairs and asked why a thing was taking so long, because he had not known and had said something vague and felt foolish about it afterwards.

I told him what to say. I taught my son that sentence the way you teach a child to answer the telephone properly.

He used it for four years. He was better at it than I am, because he meant it.

He was not a version of me, and that matters more than it will look, because everything afterwards depends on it.

I have spent twenty years making sure nobody notices my work. He could not be in a room without being liked. It was not charm — charm is something people do on purpose, and he was far too lazy. It was that he was more interested in the person in front of him than in what he had been intending to say, which is rarer than honesty and much harder to counterfeit, and it meant people told him things standing up, on landings, with their coats already over their arms.

He was untidy in a way that cannot be corrected. He could not be made to eat at a table. He had a manner of agreeing with you that meant he had stopped listening four sentences earlier, and I could always tell, and I never once said so, because the alternative was to have the argument.

And he had a thing about fairness that is a nuisance in a family and a catastrophe in an office. At nine he would not take the larger half of anything — not out of generosity, he would go through a whole bowl of fruit to find the smaller pear and then be extremely pleased with himself about it.

There was a father. He is not in this account. I am aware that a reader will notice the gap and will already be furnishing it, and I am going to leave them to it, because the alternative is to tell you about a man who has nothing to do with anything I did and who would only be standing there to make me easier to forgive.

I will give you one thing, and only because it is Arash's and not mine. He was nine. He did not ask any of the questions a child is expected to ask. What he asked, four or five months later, was whether it had been anybody's fault, and I said no, and he accepted it completely and never raised it again.

I was relieved. I have wondered since whether what he accepted was the answer or the certainty it was said with.

And he would say, about one of them: *she doesn't want to go, she wants someone to ask her not to.*

I remember being proud of that sentence and using it myself afterwards, at least twice, as though I had arrived at it.

We worked well. That is the plain fact and I will not complicate it now. Two people in four rooms with a shared occupation and an old woman in the back bedroom and a routine that held. He took the second cup of tea at eleven with me. He argued about the flat — he thought it should go to a family rather than to single people, and he was right, and I did not change it.

He asked me once why the fourth thing was not written down anywhere.

I said there was no fourth thing.

21.

APPLICATION FOR PERMANENT RESIDENCE · COMPLETE · NOT LODGED

Prepared: twenty years ago this month.

There is a drawer at the back of my office.

I said in the first part that a reader would have decided what is in it and would be wrong about the details and right about the shape, and that is still true, so here are the details.

It is a file. It is mine. It is complete — every document, every attestation, the medical, the clearance, the whole of it assembled in the correct order with the correct fastening, and every translation in it is mine and every seal on it is mine, which is a small professional irregularity that nobody has ever noticed because nobody has ever seen it.

It was never lodged.

There is no refusal in it. There is no letter, no rejection, no explanation. There is a complete application for permanent residence in another country, prepared by a woman of thirty-two over about seven months, and then nothing at all.

And here is the part I have never said out loud to anybody, and which I am now fairly sure is the centre of this account: *I do not remember deciding.*

I remember assembling it. I remember the queues and I remember which of them was in the rain. I remember the medical and the doctor's hands being cold. And then there is the rest of my life, and somewhere between those two things there was an afternoon, and I have gone back for that afternoon perhaps a thousand times and there is nothing there.

Not a blur. I know what a blur is. A room in a house you have lived in all your life that you cannot get to from any of the corridors.

And here is the other thing, which has been in the same head as the first thing for twenty years and which I have never once put beside it.

I have a great many memories of leaving.

Not of deciding to leave. Of leaving. A counter with a bag between my feet and a queue behind me. A window over a coastline at night with the cabin lights down. Arriving somewhere in snow in the wrong coat with a paper address in my hand, and the cold coming up through the soles of my shoes, and the snow the dry kind that squeaks.

I have never left this country. I have never been in an aircraft.

Every one of those is a sentence out of somebody's file. *I arrived on the fourteenth. I was met at the airport by my cousin. I had with me one suitcase and the documents listed below.* I have said thirty thousand of them in the first person, at night, alone, and they went in, and not all of them have come out.

So there is one afternoon I cannot find, and there are a hundred departures I never made.

I would rather not be asked which of the two is stranger.

22.

DECLARATION OF INTENT · DRAFT · UNUSED

I intend to return.

What I did with that, at thirty-three, was build a philosophy on top of it.

I want to be fair to the woman I was, because she was not lying to herself in any way she could have detected. She had not gone. There had to be a reason she had not gone, because people have reasons. And the reasons available were all good ones — her mother, the flat, the language, the fact that the whole apparatus of another country is a thing you have to want, and she had noticed, in the seventh month of assembling that file, that she did not want it.

So she decided that she had chosen, and that what she had chosen was correct, and that the choosing of it was the most significant thing she had ever done. And then she went looking for other people who might choose the same way, and after a while she began helping them along a little, and after a while longer she began helping them along quite a lot.

It is a perfectly coherent life and I have lived it ever since and there is not one thing in it I would call dishonest.

And I taught it. That is the part that has taken me longest to get to.

Not formally — I have never given a talk in my life and would not know how to stand. But a woman who believes she chose to stay, and who is asked twice a month by a frightened person of twenty-five whether they are making a mistake, says something. What I said was always the same thing in different words. That the ones who go spend four years explaining themselves to people who never asked. That a life is not a location. That the ones who stayed are not the ones who failed; they are the ones who were not available to be frightened.

I believed all of it. I would say it now if you woke me at four in the morning.

The only difficulty is that I was reciting the defence of a decision I have no record of making, to people whose own decisions I was at

that moment quietly postponing, and I was doing it warmly, and they went down the stairs comforted.

Except that the foundation of it — the single load-bearing fact, the day on which Mahin decided to stay — is not a memory. It is a conclusion. I reasoned backwards to it from the fact that I was still here, the way you reason backwards to the cause of a bruise.

I have made a career out of the difference between a document and the thing it describes. A copy equal with the original.

I have never once applied the test to myself, and I am fifty-two.

23.

CERTIFICATE OF NO CRIMINAL RECORD · TEHRAN · REFERENCE 11-8815

Not accepted if issued more than six months before the date of application.

Sahar's bundle came in on a Sunday in Bahman and I did not know she was Sahar.

What I knew was the docket. Reference numbers, a bureau I respect, and an address I had been watching for four years, because it is a building of one-room flats behind the hospital where the nurses live, and it is a room in my sense — people pass through it and tell the next one where to go.

I opened the second ledger. The building had sent two in nineteen months.

And this one was a nurse, twenty-six, and the file had a clinical supervisor's letter in it of a kind I have translated perhaps twelve hundred times and which is almost never true, and this one was true. You can tell. A supervisor who is writing because she has been asked writes about reliability. A supervisor who does not want to lose somebody writes about a specific night.

I sat with it a long time. Long enough that the light changed.

Because here was the third — the third from that building, which is nine more by the spring after next, and every one of them a nurse,

and I know what the nursing figures are in this country and so does everybody, and the arithmetic was not nine. The arithmetic was nine and then everybody those nine trained, and everybody they told, and a ward.

I have never in twenty years had a file in my hands that was worth more.

24.

LEDGER · PRIVATE · COLUMN FOUR

Entry: held.

I held her, and I want to describe the actual minute, because it was not a deliberation and I have never pretended to myself that it was.

I did the work first. That is the rule and I kept it — I translated every document in that file to the standard, the supervisor's letter and the diploma and the clearance and the bill in the landlord's name, and I sealed them, and they were good. They are still good. They are in a drawer and they are perfect.

Then the boy came on the Thursday and I gave him the envelope with everything in it except one number, and I said the phrase I have said nine hundred and some times, which is that this one is not finished.

He does not even shrug any more.

If the agency telephones about one of them — and they do, about one in nine — I say the other sentence, the one I have said more times than any other sentence in my life.

These things move when they move.

And then I stood at the window for a while, and what I felt was not guilt and was not triumph. It was *relief*. Because for four years I had been watching that building empty and had not been able to do anything about it, and now I could, and the thing I could do was already done.

One more thing, and then this part is over.

Somewhere in the same season — I have checked, and it is within about five weeks either way, and I have not been able to narrow it further — a bundle came in from a different bureau on a different street, and it contained the documents of a young man of twenty-four, and one of the addresses on it was mine.

I did not see it. The reason I did not is that his birth certificate went to a different translator — that bureau splits its bundles, and a birth certificate is the only document in an application that carries a mother's name.

I certified his degree, his transcript and his clearance. They carry his name and not mine.

And the other translator's page came back into the bundle afterwards, the way they all do, and went into my second drawer with my own name printed on it in somebody else's careful hand, and stayed there.

So I am not going to write that I could not have seen it. I did not see it. There is a difference between those two sentences and I have spent my working life on it, and charged for it.

And the street was my street, and the street was in the ledger, and the ledger said hold.

III. THE ANCHOR

25.

LEDGER · PRIVATE · COLUMN FOUR

Entry: held. Month four.

A hold is not an event. I want to describe what it actually consists of, because people who have had it done to them imagine something being done, and there is nothing being done. That is the whole efficiency of it.

Once a month I take out the fourth column and I read down it. Each line is a reference number, a bureau, a date of arrival and a district. Beside that there is a space where I write the month, and every month I write the next month, and that is the act. It takes me about forty minutes for the whole column and most of that is finding my glasses.

Nothing leaves. Nothing is destroyed. The files sit in the second drawer in their proper order, translated to standard, sealed, complete, and the only thing wrong with any of them is that they are in a drawer instead of a plastic envelope.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the city, a person is waiting.

I know what that consists of too, because it was described to me once by somebody who did not know she was describing it to the person responsible. You telephone the bureau. The bureau telephones the agency. The agency says it is with the translator. You wait three weeks because you do not want to be the client who telephones twice. You telephone again. It is with the translator. And at some point — this is the part I did not understand until much later, and it is the part that does the work — *you stop telephoning*, because you have begun to suspect that chasing it marks you, and because there is no evidence of anything, and because a person can only sustain suspicion of a thing that is not happening for so long before they convert it into resignation, which is easier to carry.

Four months in, they stop asking. Nine months in, they stop mentioning it. Somewhere past a year they begin to say *I looked into going, once*.

Past tense. That is the sound of it working.

I have written the next month beside a number perhaps eight thousand times and I have never once thought of it as a lie, because I never said anything.

26.

IDENTITY CARD · ISSUED TEHRAN

Height: 162 cm.

I learned her name in the fourth month and it was an accident and it was my son.

He had begun, that spring, doing the thing he does, which is that he meets them. Somebody sends somebody, and the somebody comes up the two flights and sits on the chair outside my room with their hands in their lap, and Arash gets them a tea and takes them down to the landing and talks to them for forty minutes, and by the end of it he knows what they are actually frightened of, which is never what they came to say.

He came back up and stood in my doorway with the cup still in his hand and said: Sahar. Behind the hospital. She's the one from the nursing building.

And I said — and I have had a long time with this — I said, *don't tell me their names.*

He laughed. He thought it was a joke about being overwhelmed. He said, all right, and then he told me about her anyway, the way you do, and I did not stop him a second time, and that is how I know that she had a sister in Muscat who sent voice messages that were nine minutes long, and that she had not replied to the last three, and that she was frightened of being thirty in the same room.

He told me all of it in about four minutes on a Tuesday and then he went down and I sat with a page of somebody else's transcript in front of me and did not read it.

Here is what I want understood about that moment. The discipline had held for twenty years and it did not break. I did not go to the drawer. I did not open the file. I knew a first name and a building and a sister's city, and I went on writing the next month beside a

number for another eighteen months, and I was able to do that precisely because I had never let it become more than four minutes on a Tuesday.

The discipline does not require you to know nothing. It requires you to know slightly less than enough.

27.

EMPLOYMENT OFFER · PRIVATE CLINIC, DISTRICT 7

Salary: as agreed. Commencing immediately.

The call I made was the sixtieth or so and it took four minutes.

The mechanics are worth setting out, because the mechanics are the reason it works and nobody outside this country believes me when I describe them. I did not call the clinic. I called a woman I have known for nineteen years whose husband's brother has an interest in the clinic, and I did not ask for a job, because you do not ask for a job. I said that there was a nurse who had been trained by a particular supervisor at a particular hospital and who was thinking about Muscat, and that it seemed a pity.

That is the whole sentence. *It seems a pity.*

Four days later the clinic telephoned the hospital and asked the supervisor whether she knew of anybody, and the supervisor — who did not want to lose her, which I knew, because I had translated the letter — gave them one name.

Nobody lied. Nobody was given anything. A young woman was offered a post by an institution that approached her, on the strength of a recommendation that was entirely sincere, and she has never in her life had any reason to think it was anything else.

Arash drove her to the interview because it was across the city and she did not have the fare. He did that on his own and told me afterwards, pleased, and I said that was kind.

I want to be exact: *I did not feel like a person doing something underhand.* I felt like a woman who had spent twenty years learning where the levers were and had finally put her hand on one that moved something good. It was the best day I had had in a year.

I went home and made the rice with the barberries because there was something to mark and no way to say what.

28.

UTILITY ACCOUNT · BEHIND THE HOSPITAL

Account holder: unchanged. Third consecutive year.

And the building held.

I need to explain what that meant to me, because the mechanism is easier to look at than the thing itself, and the thing itself is what I cared about, for twenty years, in good faith.

That building emptied at a rate I had been watching since the fourteenth year. One room on the second floor had sent four women out of the country in six years — the same room, four different tenants, each one arriving, learning where to go from whoever was there, and leaving. It is a machine for making nurses leave and nobody built it and nobody profits from it and it works better than anything I have ever built.

I went past it once, on purpose, and did not go in. Six storeys, a lift that has not worked since before any of them were born, a shop on the corner that sells one brand of everything, and washing on every balcony at every hour of the day, because a nurse's washing goes up when the shift ends and the shifts end at all hours.

What it is, in fact, is a village. Not in the sentimental sense — in the exact one. Forty people who are not related to each other, sharing a landlord, knowing each other's business, and handing down information that cannot be got anywhere else in the country. Which bureau is honest. Which supervisor will sign a letter and which will say she has to check. What the Muscat contract actually pays once the agency has taken its part, as against what the agency says it pays.

That information is the most valuable thing in the building. It is free. It is passed along a chain of women, most of whom have never met the first one in it, and none of whom would describe what they are doing as anything at all.

I have spent twenty years being paid to certify that one piece of paper resembles another piece of paper. The most consequential document in that building was never written down.

Sahar was the third of that cycle. After the third they go in a run.

They did not go.

Two of them married, which I had nothing to do with. One went to Shiraz, which is not the same thing at all. Four are still in that hospital tonight and one of them is a sister of one of the others, and the room on the second floor has had the same tenant for two and a half years, which had not happened since before I started counting.

Nine women. I did the arithmetic properly, the way I do it, with the ledger open and the dates written out, and the answer was nine, and the answer was right.

That was the year I stopped thinking of what I did as a series of interventions and started thinking of it as a practice. There is a real difference. An intervention is something you do to a case. A practice is something you are.

I was fifty and I had found out what I was for.

29.

MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE · REGISTRY 41, TEHRAN

Witnesses: two.

The wedding was in Khordad and it was the daughter of the woman with the husband's brother, which is how these things are, and we went because you go.

It was in a garden at Lavasan [la-va-SAAN], up in the hills where the air is several degrees cooler and every single person says so on arrival, and there were a great many lights in the trees, which is a sentence that does a lot of work in that country and which everybody there could read. My mother could not come. I stood for most of it with a glass of sharbat [shar-BAT] — the cordial — being introduced to people who wanted something, which is most people at most weddings.

There is a way of handling that, and everybody in the country has it, and it is not exactly a trick. You are warm. You are very warm. You are so warm that there is no gap left in which the thing can be said. A man wants his nephew's transcript moved to the front and he will never say so; he will tell you at length how much his sister admires you, and you will tell him at greater length that it is he who is too kind, and by the time the pair of you have finished being kind at each other the request has no doorway left to come in by. Both of you know exactly what has happened. Neither of you has said one word that could be repeated to anybody.

Taarof [taa-ROF] is the word for it, and every foreigner who learns it decides it is politeness, and it is not politeness. It is a way of conducting a whole negotiation in which nothing has been said that can be quoted afterwards. It is how a person refuses without refusing.

I am very good at it. I have been good at it since I was a girl.

It did not occur to me until this year that a woman whose two great professional skills are *rendering a thing exactly* and *saying nothing that can be quoted* has arranged her entire life around a contradiction, and has been paid for both halves of it.

Arash was on the terrace for a long time with a young man I did not know. I noticed because my son does not talk to one person for forty minutes at a party; he moves. I remember thinking it was a girl's brother and being briefly, stupidly hopeful.

In the car he was quiet. I asked what the young man had wanted and he said nothing, and I said, people always want something, and he said: not this one.

That was all. He drove and I put my head back and we went home through a city that was cooling down, and I was tired in the good way you are tired after an evening that has gone on too long but has been warm, and I remember thinking that I had a grown son who drove and that this was a thing I had made.

I have been back to that car perhaps three hundred times.

He had known for about four hours. He had it in him for the whole of the drive, sitting on my left, at the lights on the expressway

where you can see the whole northern slope lit up, and he said nothing, and I asked him nothing, because I was thinking about a wedding.

Not this one. He gave me the entire book in three words and I heard a young man being uncharacteristic at a party.

30.

CERTIFICATE OF NO CRIMINAL RECORD · EXPIRED

Not accepted if issued more than six months before the date of application.

I should say what a hold actually destroys, because until this year I could not have told you and would have said, honestly, that it destroys nothing.

It destroys the clearance first. Nobody abroad will accept one more than six months old, so the clearance is the fuse on the whole file and it burns whether or not anything else is moving. When it goes, every attestation that referenced it goes with it, and the file has to be re-timed against a certificate that did not exist when it was assembled. A file held a year is not a file a year behind. It is a file that has to be rebuilt, and the rebuilding costs money, and the money is the thing the person did not have in the first place.

It destroys the offer. Every one of them has something at the other end with a shape to it — a place on a course, a sponsor's letter, a cousin who has cleared a room. None of those wait a year. Cousins marry. Courses fill.

And it destroys the sister.

That one took me until this year to see. A sister abroad who is waiting for you sends nine-minute voice messages. A sister abroad who has been waiting for you for fourteen months sends shorter ones. At some point she stops asking when, because asking when has begun to sound like an accusation, and the conversation moves to her children and the weather where she is, and that is a permanent change and it never reverses.

The person does not experience any of this as a loss. They experience it as a year passing.

And there is a fourth thing, which I had no name for until this year, and which is the one that cannot be bought back at any price.

A person who has assembled a file has done something. They have stood in four queues. They have paid for a medical. They have asked a supervisor for a letter, which is a humiliating thing to ask and which everybody pretends is routine. And they have done all of it on the strength of a private belief that they are the sort of person who does things.

The file is not paperwork. The file is the evidence.

Take fourteen months off them and the file is still there and the belief is not. They will tell you they are waiting. What has actually happened is that they have been handed fourteen months of daily evidence that they are a person to whom things are done, and there is no clearance in the world you can buy that reverses that.

The second time they try, they try worse. I have seen the second attempts come through my office. They are thinner files. Fewer enclosures, an older photograph, and a personal statement that has stopped arguing.

Which is what I told myself it was, for seven years, in a room with a drawer in it: a year passing. Something everybody has.

31.

LEDGER · PRIVATE · SECOND NOTEBOOK

Districts and months.

He started asking me about the work that autumn and I was delighted.

I want to be clear about how it felt, because it is the cruellest thing in this account and there is nothing dramatic in it at all. For two years my son had done the part of the job that involves people and had shown no interest whatsoever in the part that involves paper. And then, over about a month, he began to ask.

How long does a clearance take. What happens if it expires. Who actually decides the order things go out in. Does anyone ever check. What is in the second notebook.

I told him. I told him all of it except the fourth thing, and I enjoyed telling him, and I have to write down that I enjoyed it, because this was not an interrogation and nothing in the room felt like one. I was being *listened to*. I am a woman of fifty-one with a specialist knowledge that is of no interest to anybody, and my son sat on the arm of the chair for an hour and a half and asked me follow-up questions.

I showed him the second notebook. I turned it round on the desk and walked him along a street and showed him how you read a room, and he was quick, and he saw the thing about the utility bills before I said it.

He asked whether I had ever been wrong.

I said, not about a room.

He asked whether a file had ever simply sat.

I said that files sit all the time, and that nobody sits them, and that anybody who imagines there is a person at the other end of a delay has never stood in a ministry in their life. I said it easily. It is one of my subjects.

He said: so what do you tell them?

And I said, *these things move when they move*, and he nodded, and did not write it down.

He said: what do you do with it?

And I said that I kept it because it was interesting, and that knowing a thing is not the same as doing anything with it, and he looked at the notebook for a moment longer and then said khob — well, then — and went to get his coat.

32.

PAYSLIP · PRIVATE CLINIC, DISTRICT 7

Three months in arrears.

The clinic went in the fifteenth month and it went the way they go, which is not a closure.

They paid late. Then they paid half. Then they paid the doctors and not the nurses, because the doctors can leave, and then there was a meeting at which everybody was assured, and then two people left and were not replaced and the remaining staff did their work, and then in Mordad the salaries did not come at all and the man with the interest in it was in Istanbul.

She stayed four months into that. Four months of working full shifts for nothing, because the arrears were owed and leaving meant abandoning them, which is the trap and every one of them walks into it.

I have translated the paperwork of a great many failed institutions and the trap is always built the same way, and nobody builds it. It is not that they are owed money. It is that the money is owed by people they know.

A hospital does not fail as an institution. It fails as forty separate conversations in a corridor with a man who has a daughter and looks tired and says next month. You cannot walk out on next month. You can walk out on an employer — but the arrangement has quietly seen to it that there is no employer in the building. There is a tired man in a corridor, and the woman beside you who will have to cover your shifts, and a ward that will be four short by Thursday.

So they stay. The arrears grow. The growing arrears are the reason they cannot afford to leave, and the fact that they cannot leave is what makes the arrears safe to keep growing.

It is the most efficient mechanism I know of for getting decent people to work for nothing, and the only thing in it anybody could be prosecuted for is the non-payment of a salary, which at that point half the country was doing.

She was twenty-seven.

That is the figure I keep returning to. Twenty-six when the file came in, twenty-seven when the clinic went. In between, the sister in Muscat had a child and the messages became about the child. The room on the second floor cost more than it had. The clearance was long dead. And the thing she had said to my son on a landing a year earlier — that she was frightened of being thirty in the same room — had stopped being a fear and become a schedule.

I heard all of this at second hand, in pieces, from Arash, over about a year, in the tone people use for news about somebody they like.

And I did nothing, and I want to be precise about why: *because there was nothing that could be done that would not have been a second intervention*, and I had a rule about that, or I believed I had. One lever per person. Anything more and you are not helping somebody stay, you are keeping them, and I knew the difference, and I was proud of knowing it.

I had put her in a job and the job had failed. That was the world, not me.

33.

LETTER OF RESIGNATION · UNDATED

Reason for leaving: personal.

She came to the office in Azar and it is the only time I have met her.

She did not come to accuse me of anything. I need that understood. She came because Arash had said that if she ever wanted her papers looked at again there would be no charge, and she wanted to know what it would cost now, in total, to start.

So she sat in the chair by the window with a folder on her knees and I took her through it: a new clearance, which is the cheap part and the quick part; a re-verification of the diploma, which is the Wednesday man; a new medical; new attestations, because the old ones all referenced a certificate nobody abroad would now look at;

and the fees, which I added up in front of her on a piece of paper because she asked me to.

The figure was about four times what it had been two years earlier. She looked at it for a while.

She did not do what people do, which is to argue with the figure, or to ask whether any of it could be left out. She took out her telephone and put the numbers into it. Then she asked me one procedural question — whether the medical could be done before the clearance came back, or had to wait — and I told her it could be done first but that it expires sooner, so most people get it wrong in one direction or the other.

She wrote that down.

I have thought about that more than about anything else that happened in my office. A woman two years into a thing that had been taken from her without her knowledge, sitting in the chair of the person who took it, making a careful note about sequencing.

Then she asked me the question. She was not angry when she asked it. That is the part I would change if I could change one thing.

She said: *Khānom* [KHAA-nom] — madam — *when I did this the first time, was there something wrong with my file?*

And I said no. Which was true. There has never been anything wrong with any file of hers.

She said: then why did it take so long?

And I said the thing. I said it the way I have said it ten thousand times, warmly, with my hands flat on the desk, and it is the sentence I have used my whole working life and I have never once heard the inside of it until that afternoon.

These things move when they move.

She said khob, and thanked me, and took her folder, and went down the stairs. Arash was on the landing and I heard them talking for a while and then the street door.

34.

TRANSLATOR'S LICENCE · RENEWAL

Valid a further five years.

What I did with that afternoon was renew my licence.

It had come up that month, as it does, and there is a form and a fee and a photograph, and I did it the following morning, and I want that on the page beside the previous entry because the two things are fourteen hours apart and I have no intention of making them look further apart than they were.

I also, over the next weeks, constructed a defence, and I am going to set it out honestly rather than in the improved version I used at the time.

The defence is that the clinic was not my doing. That is true.

The defence is that she would have gone to Muscat and Muscat might also have failed, and a failure abroad at twenty-six is worse than a failure here at twenty-eight because here she has a mother. That is also true, probably, and unfalsifiable, and I notice now that every argument I made to myself that year was unfalsifiable.

The defence is nine women against one, and the one will start again, because they do.

The arithmetic is nine to one and I checked it twice and the arithmetic is correct.

I will put down what the arithmetic has no column for, since I am being honest and it costs me nothing now.

It has no column for the fact that the nine were never asked. It has no column for the difference between a woman who is here because her life is here and a woman who is here because a drawer in my office did not open. Both are counted as one. They go into the same column and they add up the same way.

I have spent twenty years insisting on the difference between a document and the thing it describes, and charging a fee for the distinction, and the whole of my life's work rests on a method of counting that cannot tell a person from the shape of a person.

I have since had cause to think about what kind of person checks that arithmetic twice, and what she is checking it against, and why she needed the second look.

35.

LEDGER · PRIVATE · COLUMN FOUR · MONTHLY REVIEW

Items reaching twenty-four months: nine.

The first of the month is when I release.

It is the most ordinary hour in my working life. I take out the fourth column, I read down it, I find the ones that have reached twenty-four months, and I mark them, and I pull those files from the second drawer and I put them in the envelope for the Thursday, and I write the date in the last space, and that is the end of them.

Nine that month, which is on the light side.

I have described the two-year rule already and I should say how it feels from inside, because I have made it sound like a mercy and by then it had stopped being one. It had become the thing that let me do the rest. Everything I did was bearable because it stopped. A woman who holds a file for two years and then releases it is not the same as a woman who holds it forever; the release is what makes the holding an act of judgement rather than an act of destruction, and I told myself that with total sincerity on the first of every month for seven years.

I did them in order because I always do them in order. Reference numbers ascending. It is not a system, it is just how the column is written.

I was thinking, while I did it, about a ferry. A wet car deck and a queue of vehicles and somebody's dog in the back of the one in front.

That is the sort of thing that happens on the first of the month. I have never been on a ferry. Somebody's file had a crossing in it years ago and it comes back at the desk the way a tune does, with no feeling attached to it at all, and I let it run and go on writing.

Nine out, and then the drawer has to be squared, because a drawer with nine files gone out of it has slumped and the rest will not stand.

The one that would not stand was 11-4472, which had come in from a bureau I respect, in a season I remember for other reasons, from a street that is four streets from mine. Twenty months in a drawer had bent its fastening and it would not lie flat, and I turned it over to straighten it.

36.

APPLICATION FOR CERTIFIED TRANSLATION · REFERENCE 11-4472

Enclosures: four.

The name is on the front of the docket, on the right, in the box the bureau types it into.

I had turned the thing over to flatten a fastening. I was standing up. The envelope was open on the desk and the boy was due at eleven and my glasses were pushed up on my head, which is how I know I had been reading, because I only do that when I have been reading.

There is no moment. I want to be truthful about this and I have gone looking for a moment and there is not one. I did not gasp. I did not sit down. A great deal of writing about this kind of thing gives people a physical event and I did not have one.

What I had was a second or two in which the name on the docket was a name I knew from somewhere, the way you recognise a neighbour out of their district. And then a second or two in which I understood which somewhere.

And then I looked at the date of arrival, which is stamped in the corner, because the date is the part of a docket my eye goes to first after twenty years.

Twenty months.

The boy came at eleven and I gave him the envelope with eight files in it.

IV. NINETEEN DAYS

37.

VISA GRANT NOTICE · ISSUED ABROAD

The holder must enter on or before the date shown.

There was a second application.

I found it the same morning, underneath, because I had the file open by then and there is no version of that hour in which I did not open it. He had gone again on his own, through a route I would never have recommended, slower and more expensive and requiring a sponsor I have never heard of, and it had taken him fourteen months and it had worked.

I know exactly why he used that route. It is the one you use when you do not want the file to pass through anybody who knows you. It costs about a third more, it takes roughly twice as long, and its single advantage is that every office along it is a stranger. Anybody in this trade, shown that choice, would read one thing off it and one thing only, which is that the applicant was going around somebody.

I taught him that. Not deliberately. He sat in my office for four years listening to me explain to frightened people why it is always better to go through somebody you trust.

The grant was in the file. He had put it there himself, in my drawer, in my office, in with the papers I was holding. I have thought about that a great deal and I still cannot tell you whether it was for me to find or whether it was simply the safest place in the flat.

The notice says the holder must enter on or before the date shown.

I did the arithmetic standing up, which is how I do all arithmetic, and it came to nineteen days.

I would like to describe what I did next and there is very little to describe. I put both files back in the drawer. I closed the drawer. I worked until about four, and the work was good — I checked it afterwards, weeks afterwards, and every page I did that day is correct — and then I walked to the corner for bread because it was a Thursday, and came home, and he was on the telephone in the small room with the door half open, laughing at something.

So I did not say it that evening, because he was on the telephone.

That is the first of nineteen reasons and they are all like that.

38.

SHOPPING LIST · KITCHEN TABLE · UNDATED

Bread. Yoghurt. The other thing.

On the second day I did not say it because it was a good evening.

We ate late and my mother was lucid and funny in the way she is perhaps twice a month now, and she told a story about her brother and the bicycle that I have heard four hundred times and that Arash had not, or had pretended not to, and he sat with his chin on his hand and asked her questions she was pleased to be asked. You do not put a thing like that down in the middle of a room.

On the third day I rehearsed it in the car.

I got it to nine words. I am not going to write them here — I have discovered that I do not want to see them on a page — but they were nine, and they were plain, and they did the whole job, and I said them aloud twice at the lights on Modarres with the radio off.

On the fourth day I said his name across the table and he said yes? and I asked him to pass the bread.

I have handled the files of a great many people who had nineteen days, and I know what a person does with nineteen days. They do everything at once and in the wrong order. They telephone at hours that are rude. They come up my stairs three times in a fortnight to look at a thing that cannot possibly have changed since Tuesday.

I did none of that, and it did not occur to me even once that I was not doing it.

On the fifth day I began to notice something, and I noticed it the way you notice a smell in your own flat, which is to say incompletely and with resistance, and it was this: I was not failing to say it. *I was holding it.* There is a difference and it is my whole profession. A thing you fail to say is a thing that got away from you. A thing you hold is a thing you have decided about, once, and then re-decide every morning by not opening the drawer.

I had a rule about that. Two years.

I had nineteen days.

39.

EMPLOYMENT ENQUIRY · VERBAL · NOT RECORDED

Made on his behalf and without his knowledge.

On the sixth day I made the rice with the barberries.

It looks like nothing. It was the beginning of everything that followed. He likes it. It takes two hours. There was no occasion. He came in at eight and saw the pan and said *what's this for*, and I said no reason, and he ate two plates and thanked me and washed up, and I stood in the kitchen afterwards with my hands in the water understanding perfectly well what I had just done and unable to make it stop.

On the seventh day I telephoned a woman I have known nineteen years.

I did it from the office with the door shut, which I had never once needed to do before, and I said the sentence. Not for a nurse this time. I said there was a young man, very good with people, who had been doing administration for a small concern and might be wasted there, and that it seemed a pity.

It seems a pity. I heard myself say it. I heard the shape of it, the exact shape, the thing I had built and refined over sixty telephone calls, and I did not stop in the middle and I did not hang up.

She said she would ask. She asked. Four days later a man rang our flat and spoke to my son for seven minutes about a position, and Arash was polite to him and said he would think about it, and afterwards he came and stood in my doorway and looked at me for a moment and said: that was quick.

I said, these things move when they move.

He said khob, and went to bed.

40.

**DEED OF ASSIGNMENT · OFFICE PREMISES AND SEAL ·
UNEXECUTED**

Transferee: declined.

On the ninth day I offered him the deposit on a flat I would have had to borrow against, and he said that was mad, kindly, and that he was fine where he was.

On the tenth day I offered him the practice.

I had not planned it. I want that on the record because it is the only thing I did in those nineteen days that was not a deliberate manoeuvre, and it came out of me at the kitchen table at about half past nine at night with the plates still down.

I said: you should take the office.

He said: what?

I said it properly then. That the licence cannot be transferred but the practice can — the premises, the clients, the agencies, the relationships that took me twenty years and that die with me otherwise. That he could sit the examination; that he is more than capable; that there are two years of study in it and I would carry us both for two years. That the seal is the only thing in this country that has not lost value in my lifetime. That it is a door and it is the only one I own and I was offering it to him.

I have never said so much at one time to anybody.

He listened to all of it without moving. He is very like his grandfather in that.

And then he said: *Maman* [maa-MAAN] — mother — *thank you. I don't want it.*

Not *I couldn't*. Not *let me think*. He said he did not want it, which is the truthful answer and the one that leaves nowhere to go, and then he got up and cleared the plates because it was his turn, and ran the tap, and I sat at the table behind him and understood that I had just tried to buy my son with the only thing I had and that he had seen the price on it from across the room.

41.

LEDGER · PRIVATE · COLUMN FOUR · FINAL ENTRY

Items released: all.

On the eleventh day I emptied the drawer.

It took four hours and I did it alone with the door locked and I did not stop for tea. Every file in the fourth column. I pulled them, checked them against the ledger, wrote the date in the last space, and stacked them, and the stack came to the height of my forearm.

A hundred and forty-one.

I telephoned the bureaux myself, which I have never done in twenty years, and said there had been a delay at my end and that the work was complete and would go out on the Thursday, and every one of them said the same thing, which was: no problem, Khānom, thank you for letting us know.

No problem. Fourteen times.

And then, because I had the numbers in front of me and nothing left to do with my hands, I did the other thing, which I had never once done. I went through the second ledger and I looked up where the hundred and forty-one had come from.

The bureaux told me what the bureaux knew. Nine of them were no longer at the addresses on file.

Two were dead. Not of anything to do with me — a woman of sixty-one and a man of forty-four, both of them from causes that are simply what happens to people, and I am not going to pretend to a grief I did not feel for two strangers. What I felt was administrative. I took their files out of the stack and put them somewhere else and my hand was steady.

And one — one — came back at me through her bureau, four days later, to ask whether this meant it was moving, and I said yes, and she said, in a completely ordinary voice: oh. I'd stopped thinking about it.

Four hours to undo seven years and the total effect of it in the world was one woman saying *oh*.

I had known that would happen before I started. That is the part I would like somebody to explain to me. I knew, and I did it anyway, and I have since understood that I was not releasing them. I was doing the only thing I know how to do with a file when I want to feel better, and there is a word for that and the word is not atonement.

42.

FIELD NOTE · SATTARKHAN · IN ANOTHER HAND

She has not hung her pictures.

On the thirteenth day I found a page.

It was on the desk in the small room, square to the edge, one sheet of lined paper with his handwriting on it. I was not searching. I had gone in for the good scissors.

At the top, a name I did not know, a woman's, and an address in Sattarkhan with a flat number. Underneath, a date from the previous spring. And then four lines of notes in the way he writes when he is not writing for anybody, half sentences, the middle of a thought.

Nine years in the two rooms. Pictures still in the box they came in. Not untidy — tidiest person I've met. Apologised to me for the walls.

I read it twice.

I want to be exact about what I understood, because I have gone back and looked at the shape of my own ignorance and it is not a comfortable object. I understood that my son had visited a woman in Sattarkhan. I understood he had written it down. I thought — and this is the whole of what I thought, standing there with the scissors in my hand — that he had become interested in the work at last, and that this was some kind of record-keeping of his own, and that it was rather good, and that I would ask him about it when there was a moment.

I was pleased.

I put the page back exactly square with the edge of the desk, which is the thing I have not been able to stop thinking about since — that I took care to leave it as I found it, out of a kind of courtesy, so that he would not know I had been in.

I had that in my hand and I could not read it. Thirty thousand documents and the first real one to cross my desk in twenty years, and I looked straight at it and saw filing.

What I did instead was stand there and have, very clearly, a memory of a platform in a cold country. A departures board clicking over. A woman two along from me eating something out of paper.

I was standing in the small room at home with a pair of scissors in my hand. It lasted perhaps four seconds and there was nothing in it, no feeling of any kind, and then it stopped and the page was still in front of me and still unreadable.

I have had those for twenty years and I have never once minded them.

I minded that one.

43.

MEDICAL PRESCRIPTION · REPEAT

Dispense monthly. Nine, one, six, nine.

On the fifteenth day my mother said it at dinner.

She had been quiet all week, which happens, and we had got used to arranging the conversation around her rather than through her. Arash was telling me about somebody's brother. My mother put down her spoon, and looked at him, and said, in a perfectly clear voice:

He's going, isn't he.

There was a pause of about two seconds.

I said: eat your rice, maman.

Arash said nothing at all. He did not look at me and he did not look at her. He took the dish of herbs and moved it two inches closer to

her, which is a thing you do so that your hands have somewhere to be.

And she picked up her spoon and ate, and within a minute she was asking whether the yoghurt was from the good place, and we were both extremely quick to tell her about the yoghurt. We were quick together. We came in almost on the same word. Two people who had not exchanged one syllable on the subject in a fortnight, coordinating perfectly, at speed, to bury a true sentence spoken by an old woman.

That is the closest we came. Not on any of the nineteen days did either of us get nearer than that, and it was not either of us who got us there.

The flat was lighter that week and I had been pretending not to notice. The bicycle went on the twelfth day, to a cousin's boy, and Arash said it was because of the brakes. The winter coat went on the fourteenth and nobody said anything about the season. There was a shelf in the small room that had books on it and then had fewer books on it and then had a lamp standing in the middle of it, which is what a shelf looks like when somebody has arranged the remaining objects so that it will not look empty.

44.

DEGREE CERTIFICATE · CERTIFIED THIS DAY

A copy equal with the original.

On the seventeenth day he asked me to certify a document.

He came into the office in the afternoon with a folder, which he has done a thousand times, and put it on the desk and said that the place at the other end wanted his degree in English and would I do it.

He had the fee ready. He had counted it out. I waved it away and he put it back in his pocket without arguing, which he would normally have argued about.

There was no place at the other end that wanted anything. I had the grant notice in my own drawer and I had read it standing up

sixteen days earlier. Either he knew that I knew, or he did not, and there was no way to establish which without saying the thing, and I did not say the thing.

I took the folder and said I would have it by the evening.

I did it at the kitchen table because the light is better there in the afternoon. The transcript first, then the certificate. It is not difficult work; I could do it in my sleep and on the night hours I effectively do. The faculty, the field, the date of award. I remember the date because I was there, in a hired gown, in Tir, in heat, and his grandmother came and had to sit down twice.

I checked it twice, which I do for everybody.

Then the seal out of the second drawer, and the pad, and my signature, and the date, and the words that are on every page I have ever certified, which are that this is a copy equal with the original.

It took about forty seconds.

I gave it back to him across the table and he said thank you and put it in the folder and went out, and neither of us said one word about what it was for.

45.

INVENTORY · HALL CUPBOARD

One coat, removed.

The eighteenth day was a Sunday and I cooked, and it was an entirely ordinary dinner.

We had the fish because it was Thursday. My mother ate a little and went in early. He talked about the football, which I do not follow and which he explains to me anyway, and he was funny about a goalkeeper, and I laughed, and it was not performed. That is the thing I would most like to get across about that evening: it was not performed by either of us. It was an ordinary Thursday between two people who like each other, sitting inside a fact.

He washed up. I dried. He is faster than me and always has been and it irritates me and I said so, as I always do, and he said as he always does that I am welcome to swap.

On the nineteenth day I went to work having decided.

I had decided in the night, properly, the way you decide at four in the morning, and it was going to be that evening after my mother had gone in, at the table, with the nine words, and then whatever came after the nine words. I had thought about what came after and I had no plan for it and that was all right. Twenty years of finding the lever and for once I had nothing except a sentence.

I did the Thursday bundle. I did it well. I remember thinking that I would want to have worked properly on that day.

I came home at about six.

The hall was tidier than it had been that morning. That is the whole of it — no note on the door, nothing dramatic, just a hall in which two pairs of shoes had become one pair, and the cupboard door shut that is never shut.

The letter was on the kitchen table, under the salt, so it would not move.

46.

LETTER · UNSTAMPED · HAND DELIVERED

Page one of nine.

Maman.

I am writing this the way you taught me because it is the only way I know how to argue. Each of these has a heading because everything you ever showed me had a heading. You will find that easier to read than a letter and I think you will find it harder to put down, and I am sorry about that, and I am doing it anyway.

First, so you are not searching: I know. I have known since the wedding at Lavasan. A man I had never met told me on the terrace that your office had sat on his file for two years and that everybody

in a certain kind of queue knows your name, and I told him he was wrong, and I was rude to him, and I was not sorry.

Then I checked. It took four days in the end, but I had the shape of it inside the first evening, which is why I was no use to you in the car. I did not need your notebook for it. I had watched you read a street for four years and I could do it standing up.

I asked you to show me the notebook that autumn anyway. You turned it round on the desk and walked me along a street and were pleased that I was interested, and I was looking for one thing in it I had got wrong. There was nothing in it I had got wrong.

I want you to know that I spent that week trying to find the version where you were innocent. There is one. It is that you keep a private record because it interests you and you have never acted on it. I wanted that to be true more than I have wanted anything, and on the Friday I went to the office when you were with grandmother and I opened the fourth column and counted.

A hundred and forty-one.

And one of them was mine, which I did not need to check, because I had been asking you about it for six months and you had been telling me, kindly, every time, that these things move when they move.

I am not going to write about that until the end. I want to do the others first, because they are the reason I did anything at all, and because if I put myself first you will read the rest of it as a son being hurt and you will be able to manage it.

47.

LETTER • PAGE FOUR

Sattarkhan, and eight others.

I went to see them. Not all of them — eighty-one, over fourteen months, of the hundred and forty-one, and another sixty from the older columns that you released years ago and never thought about again.

I told them I was doing a study of people who had considered emigrating and had not. Maman, not one of them refused me — not one, and that is the first thing I want you to sit with, because you have spent twenty years believing these people would resent being asked and they have simply been waiting for anybody to ask.

> RESIDENCE CERTIFICATE · SATTARKHAN · nine years at the same address

She has lived in two rooms since she was twenty-six. Her pictures are still in the box they came in. Not because she is untidy — she is the tidiest person I have ever been in a room with. It is because a nail in a wall is a sentence about the future and she is not prepared to write one. She made me tea and apologised for the walls. I want you to sit with that: she apologised to me.

> LANGUAGE CERTIFICATE · C1 · pass

He has done an hour of German every night for four years. He is fluent. He has never been to Germany and can no longer afford the application. He still does the hour. I asked him why and he said: if I stop, the four years become something, and at the moment they are still nothing, and nothing is easier to carry.

> MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE · REGISTRY 8 · no children recorded

They were going to have it there. They are forty-one and forty-three. They did not say anything about it and neither did I, and we talked about her work for an hour, and when I was leaving she said at the door, not looking at me: we left it a bit late, didn't we. She was smiling. I could not answer her.

> CERTIFICATE OF NO CRIMINAL RECORD · applied for four times · never issued

He is in Van. He has been in Van for fourteen months and I telephoned him and he talked for an hour and a quarter.

He was one of yours. Held nineteen months — and in the fourteenth month of your holding it, a court finished with something from 1401 that had been sitting about for two years and gave him a sentence he did not serve a day of. He was not in a cell for an hour. But it is a conviction of the kind that goes on the certificate, and it sits on

the certificate for seven years, and for seven years the certificate is the one document he cannot produce.

He is thirty-one. He will be thirty-eight.

Maman, the whole of it turns on fourteen months. If his file had gone out in the ordinary four weeks he would have been abroad a year and a half before any court in this country got round to writing his name on anything.

So he went the other way. He paid a thousand dollars at a café in a border town, and he says you do not find them, they find you, because a man with a rucksack in Maku is not a mystery to anyone. He was told eight o'clock. They went out on dirt roads to a tent above the valley where you can see the patrol posts below you, and by the time they were actually walking there were about a hundred people from four countries and seven or eight guides with fifteen each.

He learned afterwards that the Afghans walking beside him had paid two hundred and fifty for the same night.

Near the line the guides thinned out, and then there were soldiers in front of them and soldiers behind them, and they fired over everybody's heads, and the group came apart in every direction and some of them were taken. He lay behind a rock until it was light. Then he paid another hundred and twenty-five to be driven to Van.

Here is the part I want you to keep. I asked him whether he blamed anybody, and he said no, twice, and then he said:

I would have gone through the door. I had the whole file. I just could not get the last paper.

He is thirty-one. He is not permitted to work where he is. He has a number and an appointment, and the appointment is in fourteen months.

There are seventy-eight more of these and I am not going to write them all out. What they have in common is not misery. Most of them are managing. What they have in common is that every one of them is living beside a completed application, in a drawer or a box

or a folder at the back of a shelf, and every one of them knows exactly where it is, and not one of them has thrown it away.

They are not staying, Maman. Nobody has stayed. They have all been about to leave for between four and nine years, which is a different thing, and it is the thing you made.

48.

LETTER · PAGE NINE

Signed, and not certified.

Here is the argument, as briefly as I can put it.

You believe you are giving people time. You think a delay returns a decision to somebody — that they get another year to look at it, and some of them look again and stay, and that is a gift.

You cannot pause a person. A file waits. A life does not. What twenty months produces is never a second look; it produces somebody arriving at the far end of it two years older, with an expired clearance, a sponsor who has stopped answering, savings worth half, and a sister who has stopped asking when. They stay. Not one of them chooses to. And a person who stayed without choosing is not a citizen of anywhere, and they know it, and they raise their children on the story of it.

Which brings me to the part I did last and wish I had done first.

Then I did the thing you taught me, which is that a number means nothing without the number beside it. I went back to the same streets and found the people who went through your office in the ordinary time — four to six weeks, sealed, handed back, nothing done to them. There are twenty-six of those in my notes and twenty-six of them are well. They took the paper home, and looked at it, and decided not to go, and they say so in the present tense.

Not one of them is in your fourth column. I checked each one twice, because I badly wanted it to come out the other way.

Your successes are the people you left alone.

And the last thing. I went and found their children. The ones old enough. There are, by my count, nineteen young people in this city whose mother or father was held by you, who grew up hearing that this country takes things from you and gives nothing back, and who have applications open at this moment. Some of them will have crossed your desk. You will have held one or two, because they are on the streets you watch.

You did not stop anything. You made it take longer, you made it hurt, and now you are doing their children.

About mine: you held my file for twenty months. I know you did not read my name. I want you to sit with the fact that it would have been better if you had. Then it would have been a decision, and I could have argued with a decision. Instead I was processed.

I have not used the papers you certified for me. I applied again on my own, the long way, and it cost me fourteen months and most of what I had, and it is done. I am not doing that to punish you. I am doing it because I have read a hundred and forty-one people who cannot tell any more which parts of their lives they chose, and I am not going to be one.

I am not going because it is better there. I have read your files. I know it is not.

I am going because I want the decision to be mine, and this is the only house in which I could not have one.

Look after grandmother. I will telephone on Fridays.

Arash

49.

**PERSONAL STATEMENT · REFERENCE 11-4472 · PAGE
THREE**

I intend to return.

I went to the office the next morning and opened the file.

Not the second one. The first — the ordinary one, lodged through an ordinary bureau twenty months earlier by a young man who had

no reason to think anything would happen except the thing that is supposed to happen.

I had never read it. I had translated every page of it and I had never read one.

His birth certificate is in there. Another translator did it, because that bureau splits its bundles, and a birth certificate is the only document in an application that carries a mother's name. It is a good piece of work. She has used the form I would have used.

His transcript. The subjects at fourteen. He wanted to be a vet until he was nine, and I could not have told you that this morning, and it is on the third page of his own statement, in an aside the form did not ask him for.

I know thirty thousand people's mothers' maiden names.

And at the back, where it always is, the personal statement. Three pages, which is two more than the form wants. Every applicant writes one, and there is a form of words everyone uses because the form of words is expected, and the last line of it is always the same line. I have rendered it something over thirty thousand times without once stopping, the way your hand does the transliteration table without asking you.

I intend to return.

Nobody means it. It is on the page because it has to be on the page. I have translated it for people who were selling their mother's flat to leave and I have never given it one second of thought in twenty years.

He wrote it twenty months ago, before any of this, when he still thought a file was a file.

He might have meant it.

I got out a clean sheet and I did the work properly, the way I was taught, and I rendered his last line into English, and I sat with it in front of me.

GLOSSARY

Aban [aa-BAAN] — The eighth month, late October to late November.

Attestation — The stamp by which one office confirms the seal of the office before it. Nobody attests the document. They attest each other, in order, down a chain, and the chain ends at an embassy.

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

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

Clearance — A certificate of no criminal record, required by every destination. Quick and cheap to obtain at home and useless within months abroad: no receiving country will look at one more than six months old, and several want three. That is what makes it the fuse on an application — the window burns whether or not anything else is moving, and when it dies every attestation that referenced it dies with it and the file has to be rebuilt around a certificate that did not exist when it was assembled. It reports convictions, not accusations. A conviction of the effective kind stays on it for years afterwards, which for the person it belongs to is the same as a locked door.

Dey [DAY] — The tenth month, late December to late January. The month in which the air in that city stops being air.

Docket — The cover sheet clipped to the front of a bundle. It carries the reference number, the bureau, the date of arrival, and — in a box on the right, where a person who has trained herself not to look at names does not look — the name.

Khānom [KHAA-nom] — Persian, *lady, madam*. What you call a woman whose position you respect and whose first name you are not going to use. It is also what a client calls the person refusing them, in the same voice, with no change of tone available to mark the difference.

Khob [KHOB] — Persian, *well, good*. Well, then. All right. It closes a subject, agrees to a thing, or accepts what cannot be helped, and in this household it does all three and is never explained.

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

Lavasan [la-va-SAAN] — A district in the hills north-east of Tehran, several degrees cooler than the city. A garden there with a great many lights in the trees says something about a family that nobody at the wedding has to say out loud.

Legalisation — The chain a certified translation travels after it leaves the translator: Ministry of Justice, then Foreign Affairs, then the destination embassy, in that order and no other. Each office authenticates the stamp before it rather than anything anybody wrote.

Maku [maa-KOO] — A town on the north-western border. The last Iranian place on the road that does not require paper.

Maman [maa-MAAN] — Persian, *mother*. What the children say. The more formal word is *mādar*, and the distance between them is about four years and cannot be crossed back.

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

Nowruz [now-ROOZ] — Persian, *new day*. The new year, at the spring equinox. The week in which people who are owed nothing send something anyway, every year, for as long as they are able.

Pârti [PAAR-tee] — Persian, from the English *party*, *having somebody*. Connections, and the use of them — the reason the other person got the bed, the licence, the bay at the terminal. Everybody in the country uses the word and everybody uses it bitterly, and the country runs on the thing it names. It describes moving a person up a queue past somebody who was there first. There is no word for moving one down, because until now there has been nobody in a position to need one.

Sharbat [shar-BAT] — Persian via Arabic, *a drink*. A cordial of fruit or flowers, kept for guests and for the new year. There is a good one and an ordinary one and everybody at the table knows which is on it.

Sworn translator — A translator licensed by the Ministry of Justice, whose seal has legal force and whose rendering of a document is the version that foreign offices act on. The oath is short and is entirely concerned with accuracy. There is nothing in it about consequence.

Taarof [taa-ROF] — Persian, *offering, courtesy*. The ritual exchange of deference by which a request is refused, or a refusal accepted, without either party saying one word that could be repeated afterwards. Foreigners learn it as politeness. It is nearer to a negotiating instrument, and its whole advantage is that nothing in it goes on the record.

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

Toman [to-MAAN] — Persian, *ten thousand*. What money is counted in when people speak, as against the rial it is written in. Ten rials to the toman, and the gap between the two is where a decade went.

Van [VAN] — A city in eastern Turkey, some hours beyond the border. The first place on the other side where a person can stop walking and begin waiting. People wait there a long time.

Verification — Confirmation by the issuing body that a degree is genuine. It requires an office across the city whose telephone is answered on Wednesdays, sometimes, by a man whose name nobody in the profession has ever established.

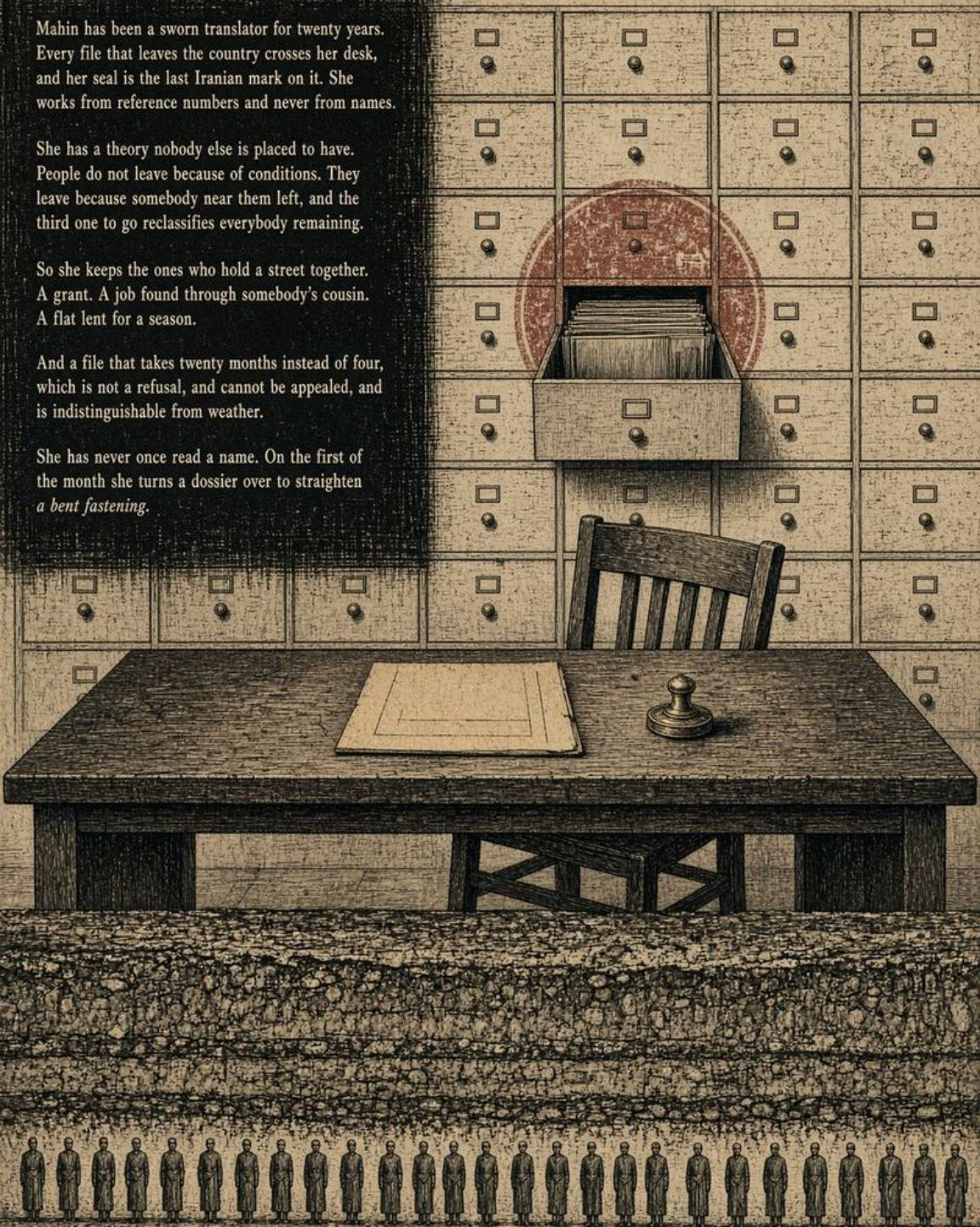
Mahin has been a sworn translator for twenty years.
Every file that leaves the country crosses her desk,
and her seal is the last Iranian mark on it. She
works from reference numbers and never from names.

She has a theory nobody else is placed to have.
People do not leave because of conditions. They
leave because somebody near them left, and the
third one to go reclassifies everybody remaining.

So she keeps the ones who hold a street together.
A grant. A job found through somebody's cousin.
A flat lent for a season.

And a file that takes twenty months instead of four,
which is not a refusal, and cannot be appealed, and
is indistinguishable from weather.

She has never once read a name. On the first of
the month she turns a dossier over to straighten
a bent fastening.



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