Peyman

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I was standing behind the staircase door that opened to the courtyard, swallowing an untimely sneeze. When the police car arrived, everyone had gone up to the fourth floor and returned to the yard. They summoned me too. The noise of an officer's radio echoed in the courtyard. Soltani :leaned against the door. The officer asked

"?How long has this 'Peyman' been living here"

"...About five or six years"

"?Is he alone"

".His sister visits him sometimes"

"?When did you last see him"

Mrs. Soltani lived on the first floor and kept track of everyone's comings and goings, but Peyman :was her blind spot

"...He comes and goes in a way that you just don't notice..."

"?The officer said, "You mean he'd sneak up all these stairs

"...Hushang answered, "Kind of, like a cockroach

Hushang owned a small hardware store and lived on the second floor with his wife, Afsaneh. He :added

One day I was putting my key in the door and saw his balcony door was open; I'd never seen" "...him leave it open

"?Was the front door open too"

"...Uhhhh... yeah"

A cold wind, carrying Hushang's cigarette smoke, slipped under the door hinges and twisted into the capillaries of my nose. My sneeze turned into tears that blurred my vision. It turned into blood that I wouldn't let escape my nose. If I pressed myself against the wall and went up the stairs, my shadow would fall on the other side of the glass door, right behind Soltani, and no one would .notice me. I put my foot on the first step

"?The officer said, "Where is your third-floor neighbor

"...Soltani answered, "I'll call her right now

My heart sank. I patted my pocket. I remembered seeing my phone on the kitchen counter last. :The officer continued

"?Have you, or any of the neighbors, ever had a problem with Peyman"

No, offi... No, sir! We aren't the type to go after someone with a knife and nails just because they" "'!parked in front of the garage. At most, a dirty look, an 'Excuse me

"...Hushang added, "We just lift their windshield wipers

Soltani continued, "Everyone in this neighborhood is like family... Like Shahin's daughter; in that brown building, they said she ran away... thought she went somewhere far. But she just went to "...the white house at the end of the alley, to Karim-pour's son

Hushang chuckled softly, "But if Peyman was family, he was like those distant cousins you barely "...see even on New Year's

The sound of an officer stomping his feet and saying, "Yes, sir!" cut the chatter. The smell of Hushang's smoke and Soltani's rambling stopped too. They didn't speak unless spoken to anymore. "Sir" was standing further away and didn't have the loudspeaker in his throat like they :did. His words evaporated before reaching my ears, leaving only the answers

"...No, sir. They live abroad"

"...It's the real estate agent... He handles all their business"

Around seven in the morning, I had been lying on the sofa in my living room. The whole alley was asleep. The sun was just cutting its path through the cold air. First, it passed through the window opposite me, then through the glass coffee table, spilling its seven colors onto the rug. The beige sofa in the living room was the only place not covered in a snowfall of paper and cardboard. Acrylic tubes, glue, brushes, and cut-out photos blanketed the entire house. I was finishing the illustration for the last page of a story. I was hungry, and the chocolate cake in the fridge was calling my name, but I didn't want my quiet morning, which was lounging on the sofa with me, to .take its arms from around me

A woman's screaming echoed from the floor above. High-heeled slippers ran down the hallway. Then slippers carrying heavy weight stomped on the ground. I jumped out the door and ran up. :Parisa, Peyman's sister, was pounding on the door with both hands, crying

"...He's not answering... he's not answering"

"...Soltani said, "Maybe he's asleep, dear

"...It's been a week"

"...Well, during these holidays, maybe he went on a trip"

"?His phone. It's off too... Mr. Hushang, can you open this door"

"...?Me"

"!For God's sake"

"...Do something. Maybe he fell ill, collapsed"

Hushang went to his apartment and returned with something like a thin sheet of metal in his hand. Afsaneh pulled his sleeve on the lower landing and they whispered; Parisa's begging convinced them. With that thin metal sheet, the iron latch of the door gave way. Parisa pushed the door; the sound of rusty hinges mixed with the wind echoed in the stairwell. The front door opened to a small living room with a kitchen straight ahead and a balcony on the left. The balcony door was open. The bushy tail of a brown cat, pieces of a black cat's fur and body, feathers and wings of pigeons, crows, and doves were scattered from the balcony floor all the way to the small rug in the middle of the room. There, other pieces of cats and birds, as if they

had tangled with each other again, were scattered next to torn pieces of paper, continuing down the right hallway to the bedroom door. Cat scratch marks were visible on the old plaster walls .where the sky-blue paint was peeling

.Parisa gasped in terror. She clenched her fist and struck her chest

My jaw began to tremble. It felt like a balloon filled with ice popped in my nose. Before my hands could reach my face, my lips parted... but I had held back the wandering sneeze for so long that it escaped sounding like a sorrowful sigh. Behind the door, the talking continued. I breathed a sigh of relief and started creeping up from the corner of the wall. Before reaching the landing, the cold :wind pushed me from behind. When I turned around, Hushang was standing in the doorway

"...!Ah!... Here she is"

.I froze in place

Before Soltani could poke her head in, raise her eyebrows, and pull me out, Hushang picked up the metal sheet he had dropped under the stairs and shoved it crumpled into his pocket. Soltani :said

"...Go ahead, Mr"

"!The officer emphasized, "He is the Inspector

I ended up right in front of the Inspector. I wasn't a good liar, and being bombarded with :questions, eye to eye, made my throat dry. He paused. He said

"...!You finally graced us with your presence"

.The color of his eyes was close to the blue you see in the ocean near the horizon line

"?You haven't heard anything from this Peyman"

.And his voice could bring the oceans to a boil

:Soltani got flustered first

"...No, poor guy, he's just like us"

.Then, under the Inspector's gaze, her tongue stopped working

"...I whispered, "No

"?Did you interact with him at all"

".No"

The image of my earring bead lying on the floor in Peyman's house flashed in my mind. I :repeated

"...No, not at all"

:He paused again. It felt like his eyes were locked onto my pupils

"...?What about the day those animals tore each other apart up there?... Didn't you hear anything"

:He could extract any answer he wanted. I cast my eyes down

".I didn't hear it... I listen to a lot of music... loudly"

The sound of Afsaneh coughing, along with the click-clack of Parisa's heels, reached the yard before they did. I felt the weight of that gaze lift from my face. Afsaneh was holding Parisa's arm :with one hand and pushing the door with the other. She said

"...We asked... but the neighbors haven't seen him"

:They stood in a corner. The Inspector said

"?Do you know who he talked to or greeted the most"

:Afsaneh didn't think long

"...Nobody. He was shy. Not that he stuttered"

"?Have you seen him in the past week or two"

Maybe... that day I was coming back from the market... I saw him holding a cardboard box. I'd" "...seen it before too

:She turned to Parisa

"?What was he buying box after box"

Parisa, in the middle of her pale, bony face, had two chestnut eyes surrounded by the color of cooked beets; she had become a large cotton doll being held by the arm so she wouldn't fall. She muttered under her breath occasionally, from the heat of the garlic and vinegar boiling in her :heart. She said

"...For his calligraphy, probably"

:The Inspector glanced at the background check paper in his hand

"...Well, this man used to be an employee"

Hushang said, "He said himself he worked in insurance many years ago, then took an early ".buyout

"?So his job now is... just this calligraphy, huh"

:Parisa nodded. Afsaneh said

".It seems people placed orders with him, someone would come and take the canvases"

Officer Abadi, see if you can find a trace of the guy... We're going back up, anything you find" ".goes to fingerprinting

A fever and chills hit my head and neck; it slithered down my chest and clawed at my stomach. Obeying the order, the officer called a soldier, and both went to the fourth floor behind the Inspector. We were told to stay in the yard, but our five-person army entered Peyman's house .with them

In the right hallway, passing the bedroom and ending at the living room, we stepped over the mangled pieces of animals. Finding a red bead among bloody bones and feathers was hard for :me. Maybe more than one bead had fallen from my earring. The Inspector asked Parisa

"?Was this bedroom door always locked"

".Yes... except for today"

"?...He stopped for a moment: "It's open?! Then why

"...I didn't dare"

Hushang said, "By the time we realized what was going on this morning, the wind blew and "...slammed it shut. The latch is stuck

"!Azimi"

The soldier said "Yes, sir" and put his toolbox down. He pulled a pair of disposable gloves from :his pocket. The Inspector continued

"...Is anything missing from his belongings? Anything valuable"

"...?He didn't have any... Where would he get it"

We stood in the living room. I had to search around the velvet sofa. The busy patterns of the red :rug that went under the sofa made my job difficult. Parisa lowered her head

".Maybe he did... I've only been... seeing him for a year"

"?Were you estranged"

When he fell in love with Sogol... one night... they came to Tehran together... We didn't hear"
"...from him for ten years

.Sogol! Peyman had spoken of his family briefly and faintly. But never of his love's name

"...Your parents, in all these years"

My dad... as long as he was alive, my mom would tell him, 'I won't forgive you if you go after"
"'!him

"...Soltani said, "It's good you went

"!My mother passed away last year..."

From under the bedroom door, Abadi peeked inside. Azimi knelt to examine the strange three-
.key lock

"?Where is this Sogol now"

"...!Parisa opened her hands and shrugged. "She must have some family somewhere

"...Her father... who said he'd cut her head off if she returned"

The Inspector nodded and pressed his lips together. His gaze fell on a calligraphy painting on the wall, which Peyman had drawn with black and gold ink. The canvas was full of wandering words and letters woven together. Before he could pull a word out of it, I sat on the sofa. The same one that had seated Peyman and me, eye to eye, the first time. I had thought to myself, putting his strange appearance aside, he's a quiet, harmless neighbor; out of respect for humanity, I shouldn't refuse his invitation. In the middle of our initial chat, he suddenly threw his right arm around my neck and pulled me toward him. He closed his eyes and raised his head. It was as if he wanted to kiss my perfume, not me. I slipped out from under his arm and stood up. He didn't say anything. He understood from my breathing and how I tensed my neck muscles. I don't remember what I said or how I left. I thought the mark of his hand was left on my neck. In front of .the mirror, I realized one of my earrings was missing something

I played with my shoelaces. I found nothing but dust under the sofa. The Inspector's eyes were :still on the painting

"?Lately, your brother's mental state... was there any change"

".He was heartbroken... his stutter was worse than before"

Azimi gave up on the lock and handle, took a crowbar and hammer to the hinges, and pulled the door aside. We made way for the Inspector, and as soon as he passed, we huddled behind him .in the hallway. Our chins were hitting each other's shoulders

The room, from floor to ceiling, was filled with small and large colorful sticky notes piled on top of each other. It looked as though a storm had swept them around the room and torn some apart; a storm of cats that had scratched the walls. As the door opened, a few notes shifted with the air current, carrying a bitter smell that hit Azimi's nose. The Inspector snatched one from the air and :held it in front of his face. He read under his breath

When you first... fell asleep on... my shoulder. The smell of your perfume and... your long... long" ".eyelashes

:He pulled another note from above his head, near the ceiling. Soltani said to me

"?Read it, dear, see what it says"

".When I picked... purple acacias... for you... the garden dogs chased... our bicycle... running"

The next one the Inspector picked from Azimi's shoulder, Hushang read aloud. He wanted to :laugh but held it in

"...When we danced and... spun and... fell on the bed... the phone rang... we didn't get up"

Parisa pushed us aside and frantically began clawing at every single paper. As if Peyman was a piece of paper she had to find. Afsaneh and Soltani struggled but managed to grab her arms and save her from being buried under millions of notes that seemed to be all of Peyman and Sogol's romantic moments. Before they could clear enough paper to see inside the room properly, the Inspector asked Abadi to take his nose to the kitchen. From the kitchen, we could only see a mass of notes being thrown out of the room; then Azimi went inside, and when he emerged from .the heart of the room, he wasn't Azimi anymore

The Inspector told him to step away from the room. Azimi pressed his back against the wall. He stared into the distance. If his eyes weren't open, distinguishing his face from the white plaster wall would be impossible. Peyman's sister was screaming, asking him what he saw. Treating us like flies he wanted to swat away, he waved his hand in the air toward us. He took a long breath, peeled his back off the wall, and threw himself out the front door. The bitter smell had intoxicated me. I could see Abadi and the Inspector talking, but I couldn't understand their words. Abadi's :voice became clear when he stepped forward and grabbed my arm

"...Didn't you hear what the Inspector said? Everyone out. Everyone go back to their homes"

Pacing Parisa's wails as she looked for Azimi, we went down the stairs when the screech of the roof door hinge put it in our heads that maybe Peyman was found up there. As if we were called, we all ran. On the roof, a joyful wind twirled, tossing the remaining pigeon feathers into the air. We found Peyman's slippers in a corner. Abadi arrived and used his hands and knees to herd us .down the stairs

Parisa leaned against the wall and sank to her knees. We had been standing in Hushang and Afsaneh's house for half an hour, figuring out how to go upstairs. I listened to a sad symphony of footsteps going up the stairs, Abadi's radio cutting in and out, and the siren of another police car .making its way through the crowd of neighbors

:Soltani tapped my arm with her fingertips. She said

"...!Step aside from the door. This is a job for me"

.We cracked the door open to the width of her shoulders. She went upstairs

For a while, every night as I washed the dinner dishes, I kept looking at the dark window of the backyard. Soltani's absence was like losing electricity and internet at the same time. A thousand tales and probabilities about what had been going on above our heads for years swam in my brain fluid. While going up and down the stairs, I clung to the wall and tried not to look up, but outside the house, I searched for news of Peyman. The neighborhood folks, too, upon seeing us, lowered their voices, their eyes bulging with unanswered questions. Finally, that night, a light :from Soltani's window fell on the wall. I rushed to the window. She pulled the curtain back

"?How are you, dear"

"?Hello... how is your grandchild"

Good, but tiny! Two and a half kilos... now they want to give her formula, she's not going to grow" like this... If my daughter was with me, this baby would be six kilos by now. Tell me, where are "?they

"!Afsaneh? I don't know, but if you're looking for news from upstairs, they're just like me"

"!?You mean nothing at all"

".Well, you were the last one to go up"

They didn't let me step foot inside! And then my son-in-law called... now the colonel at the door" is nagging me: 'You can't leave the city...' I say, 'My daughter is lying in the hospital, am I

supposed to just stand here?'... He says, 'It's an order, mother...' I said, 'Your mother is an order!' Anyway, I begged the Inspector so much... and you guys just stood there waiting for me to come! With this situation, I should go to Mir-Ata now. He kept whispering with the officers. Hovering around Parisa too. Oh my! I forgot to call that girl!"

"They didn't keep her, poor thing, did they?!"

"When they took her, they didn't say anything?"

"...Nothing! They even said we might call you all to the precinct; for questioning and stuff"

...And how much I wished they would

".Keep your ears open, I'll let you know"

Twenty minutes later, she called my mobile. I hastily found a clean t-shirt without paint stains. The smell of the shoes in front of Soltani's door filled the whole stairwell. I caught sight of the bobtailed cat that had poked its head through the railings on the upper stairs. Only it was allowed to slip through the yellow tape in front of Peyman's floor and scratch at the police seal on his front door.

I knocked gently twice on Soltani's door and entered. A mix of residents from our building and nearby alleys were sitting on whatever they could find. The noise of their chatting and the crying of fussy babies held by the women was dizzying. If I wanted to sit next to Afsaneh and Hushang, I had to tip-toe through the middle of the gathering, swerving between tea glasses and saucers. My eyes fell on the old, small sofa near the door. Shahpar Khanum was sitting on it. When her bright jade eyes fell on me, I said:

".Hello"

She didn't shift. She nodded:

"Sit...!"

My kidneys were squeezing together. I only saw Shahpar in these neighborhood "post-crisis committee" meetings. Mr. Mir-Ata too; he was sitting in the center. He said:

It's good you all came... especially those with kids... Even just for their child's sake, a person" "...should be aware of what kind of place they live in

Mir-Ata and Shahpar each lived in alleys branching off ours; they were giant radio telescopes compared to which Soltani was just a small central antenna. This golden triangle held the answers to all questions, but its sides competed and wouldn't crack the secrets unless they

gathered in one place. It was this gathering that painted their dirty snooping with the color of .elder-wisdom

:Soltani said

It's not like we weren't paying attention... no!... This godless man came and went just like a..."
"...?thing... what's its name

:She stuttered, one of the women said

"...A Jinn..?... They say it was in his room"

:Shahpar narrowed her eyes a bit. She said loudly

"...?Which of you knew that up there... besides animals... human bones were found too"

.My skull grew hot, and a colony of ants marched under my skin from my neck to my temples

:Someone asked

"?Who did he kill"

:Shahpar dropped the bombshell on the crowd

"...His poor wife"

.The hot ants poured down from my throat to my stomach

:Mir-Ata coughed loudly a few times and said

"...You've been misinformed"

:He played his ace

"...His wife was sick"

:A woman asked

"?Why did this lunatic keep her"

:A few people chimed in

".You can't go against God's word"

"...The dead belong in the dirt"

:A young man said

"...Some people cremate"

Beside the dining table, a man was sitting cross-legged on the floor. He was looking at the rug. :He said loudly

"...If I could, I wouldn't want to put my loved one under the dirt either..."

:One of the guests said

"!?What are you saying, Abbas"

:Abbas looked up from the rug

My daughter, like a bouquet of flowers... fresh and beautiful... they wrapped her and put her in a" "...?grave... Why should we let worms tear her face apart

:A bearded man with his shirt buttoned to the collar said

"...Don't speak blasphemy, Abbas Agha"

:The guests started whispering about Abbas until someone asked

"?Agha Mir-Ata, when did the wife die"

:Mir-Ata said

"...That.... I'll tell you by next week..."

When Shahpar went into the yard to talk on her mobile phone, I leaned over and asked the :neighbor sitting next to my knees on the floor

"?Does Mir-Ata know the Inspector"

No. He has a guy in forensics... That's how they found out the bones of the late Sogol were in" "...that room

:He brought his mouth to my ear

Just imagine... The ribs and thigh and pelvic bones of the poor woman were lying there... Her" clothes were there too... Dried acacias, her hair braids, he kept everything of hers... They say the "...animals took most of her pieces

My throat and mouth went dry, along with the blood pumping in my chest. I heard Peyman's footsteps and breaths as he chased one of the cats to pull Sogol's eyes from its mouth... The moment he stopped, breathless, cursing and damning himself for leaving the doors open, I saw it... The air of the house, heavy with the weight of ocean water from Sogol's disintegration, falling ...on his body, I pulled into my lungs

:Afsaneh's hand waved up and down in front of my face. She said

".You're totally zoned out! Get up, let's gather the glasses"

.Soltani was seeing the guests out

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The screams of the little girls in the yard scratched my ears. I sneakily pulled back the corner of my room's curtain. They hadn't killed each other yet. The younger girl was hugging a fluffy cat doll, and the other was chasing her. Behind the windows across the alley, several pairs of eyes were fixed on our building. My eyes, however, craved the ocean. I saw the Inspector for the last time when he was standing next to the police car. From among a few frustrated officers and :talkative neighbors, he called me over

Pay attention, if you see Peyman or any suspicious person near the house, you must report it" ".immediately

:The voice or breath, whatever came out of that chest, was like beach sand in the summer. I said

"?Will he come back"

"?What do you think"

"...In that room"

:He said loudly

"...Abadi!... Clear the alley. Tell them to leave, no one should be standing around for nothing"

:He continued quietly

"?Forget that room. You want to tell me something, don't you"

.Cold sweat covered my scalp

"?Me"

"...About Peyman, or his comings and goings"

"...No"

"?You didn't remember anything"

.I shook my head

"?If you do, you'll let me know, right"

.I shook my head again

For a long time, I searched everywhere for an unkempt, nervous man chasing cats in a park and plucking pigeon wings. Or setting up his ink and paper on a sidewalk corner, or sleeping under the subway stairs. Even though I was terrified of walking up and looking at that man's face, I couldn't go to the Inspector empty-handed. That day, I had walked the neighborhood so much my feet were blistered. On the stairs, the smell of Soltani's cutlets made me want to swallow my frustration and despair with a few bites. When she opened the door, she was in a hurry to get back to the kitchen, but passing the bedroom door, she stopped. She picked up a box from a :wooden shelf and came out of the room. She said

"...Your phone was off last night"

.One of the girls' screams cut her off

"!Wow! ... If I get a heart attack, it's not because of my cholesterol! You be my witness"

:I said

"...I wear headphones when they're in the yard"

.We went to the kitchen. She put the box on the table and tossed the last cutlets into the oil

This real estate agent, Mahmoudi, told the landlord that upstairs is still sealed! He rented it way" "...below market price to this woman

"?Should we go to the police and tell them"

What?! They'll throw the poor woman and her two kids out!... This same Mahmoudi swallowed" ".the deposit he was supposed to return to Parisa

"?Have you heard from her"

".I wanted to see if she's holding a memorial for Peyman or not, she didn't answer her phone"

.It felt like all the blisters on my feet popped at once

"!?Wait, what"

"!?Didn't you see they wrote it in the group chat"

"...My VPN is disconnected"

Yesterday they found the poor guy's body; in the water canal... there wasn't much left of him" "...either

"!So... I can't go anymore"

"?Where"

"...Nowhere"

She turned off the stove and washed her hands thoroughly. Then she went to the box. I was expecting another dish as a late birthday gift, but when she opened it, my eyelids paralyzed. I :asked

"?From... from where"

"...At the end of the alley, it was in the yard of that empty house. Under the leaves"

"...It was the cats"

"...Or maybe the crows"

"?What do you want to do with it"

I don't know yet... But I want to rub Mir-Ata's nose in the dirt... Shahpar also makes sarcastic" remarks whenever she sees me, saying it was right under my nose and my soul didn't even ".know

"?Should we go turn it in"

It's a shame! They'll just put it in a bag and take it. They won't even let us tell anyone. But look!..." "!If Shahpar sees it, it's like the whole neighborhood has seen it

"...But"

"...Actually, I'll keep it for a while... I'll decide later"

:She quickly closed the box and took it back to the room. She set three plates on the table

".My sister is coming over. Stay and eat lunch with us"

I had no appetite left. She tasked me with the salad ingredients. Instead of the first tomato, I sliced my finger to the bone. Blood stained the glass bowl and the tablecloth. She was wrapping :my hand up to the wrist in bandages. I said

"?Remember I told you the story of my new book"

"...Not that my memory is bad, but because I read so many books... they get mixed up"

"...It's about a little boy who finds a corpse in their school basement"

"...The one where"

"...I went to the museum for it. But the photos of the bones didn't turn out how I wanted"

"!?Is there a shortage of books, you too"

"!I didn't write it"

"!Well, you constantly have to draw these pictures, it scares the life out of a person"

"..The previous one got hit by censorship... I just started this one"

"...May God make it end well"

"?Can I take it"

"?Take what"

:She gasped in horror and stared at me

"?You want to put Sogol's head in a book"

"...No one will know it's hers"

:The phone rang from the living room. Soltani handed me the bandage and scissors and left

"...Don't even mention it"

I washed the dishes and took the bloody tablecloth toward the bathroom. It was opposite the bedroom. Through the cracked door, I could see the wooden shelf. The box and I looked at each .other

Deep in conversation, Soltani was straightening the rug fringes under her feet. I put the skull in a large bowl and covered it. The intercom buzzed, weaving through her words. With her ear to the phone and her eyes on me, she opened the alley door for her sister. Ending a phone call in less :than two hours was considered an insult to Soltani. I raised the bowl slightly and said

"...I took some cutlets"

We played out our pleasantries and thanks like a pantomime. I ran upstairs. The children's screaming had stopped. In front of my door, I pulled Sogol out of the bowl. Pieces of her head were missing, making it look smaller. It was as if I was holding a newborn's head in the palm of my hand. Around the eye sockets, pink and gray colors bled into each other. A piece of an orange leaf from the alley ground was stuck between the teeth. I couldn't find my key in my pocket. I had to go back downstairs to get it from the table. I turned my head; one of the little girls

.was standing a few steps up, staring at the fourth-floor landing

The sound of a man's ragged breathing reached my ears. I heard the jingle of keys turning in the lock. Unable to open it, he pounded on the door violently with a shout. The little girl looked at me :with tears in her eyes. She raised her hand and said

"...!My doll"

.Before I could say a word, Peyman came down the stairs