

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 12

SEMAZEN



CHEW Z

• A ROYA PUBLICATION •

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Printed in the Reach

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

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This novella draws on the aesthetics, terminology, and physical practice of the Mevlevi Sema ceremony for storytelling purposes, and makes no claim to represent, instruct in, or speak on behalf of that tradition or its lineage.



THE POLE. THE WHEEL. THE AXIS. THE GROUND.
THE PART NOBODY PUTS IN THE FOOTAGE.

SYNOPSIS

A hospice aide, worn down by a decade of sitting with the dying, inherits a dying woman's fragments of a lost Sufi practice and teaches himself, badly and without lineage, to whirl. He discovers the turn doesn't bring him peace — it makes him a conduit, drawing grief out of anyone who sits near him and grounding it through his own body into the floor. Word spreads. Visitors start coming. The relief is real, and so is the toll, until one grief — barbed, unwilling to pass through — lodges in him and won't leave, and he has to decide whether to keep running a doorway he built without ever learning where it's supposed to lead.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

When I was a boy, a wandering dervish passed through our neighborhood now and then — tall, long-bearded, dressed in whatever the road had left him, carrying everything he owned in a single bag. I didn't know what to make of him then. I understand it differently now: he'd found a freedom that only comes from owning almost nothing.

This book began with that image, and with a harder question — can a body reach ecstasy through repetition alone, no substance required? Semazen borrows the shape of the Sema without claiming its lineage, and asks what happens when a man opens that door alone, for other people's grief, with no one left to help him close it.

Some doors open. Some open through you. Few let you shut them again.

Chew Z

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ONE: THE WEIGHT

There's a sound hospice work leaves in you. Not a memory, not exactly — a frequency. Low, constant, somewhere behind the left ear, the way a refrigerator hums in a house you've stopped noticing you can hear. I used to think everyone had it. Then I sat next to a friend of mine, an electrician, at a funeral, and the room was silent the way rooms are supposed to be silent, and he leaned over and whispered God, it's quiet in here, and I understood that some people get to have quiet.

I did that work for eleven years. Not the arriving-after part — families think of hospice as the after, the paperwork, the van. I did the during. I sat in the room while it happened. Not once, not as an exception, as the job description. You learn things doing that no one particularly wants to know. That the hands go before the face does. That people rarely say anything you'd put on a plaque. That the body keeps doing small, stupid, administrative things — swallowing, twitching, trying to scratch an itch it no longer has the coordination for — right up until it very suddenly stops trying to do anything at all, and the stopping has a specific quality of arrival to it, like a door that was ajar the whole time finally settling into its frame.

I don't say any of this to make myself sound like I suffered something. I got paid. I chose it, twice — once out of college when I didn't know what else to do with a body that wanted to be useful, and again ten years later when I could have left and didn't. What I'm saying is: I had the hum. Years of it, stacked. And nothing touched it. Not the two years of a counselor named Deb who was kind and correct about everything and whose kindness slid off me like rain off a coat. Not running. Not the six months I don't talk about. The hum stayed exactly where it was, and I stopped expecting anything to move it, and that was more or less where I was standing when I met Nurgül Aydın.

She was eighty-three, lung cancer, second floor of a duplex that smelled like rosewater and old carpet no matter how many times her daughter aired it out. Small woman. Sharp, even at the end — sharper than most of them, actually, because most people get quiet

toward the finish and she got louder, like something in her had decided there wasn't time left to be polite. She'd come over from Turkey in the sixties with her husband, Kerim, who'd been dead nineteen years by the time I met her, and she talked about him constantly, in the present tense half the time, which her daughter found unbearable and I found, honestly, kind of wonderful. I liked being in that room. I want to say that plainly, because everything after this makes more sense if you understand that I wasn't looking for anything from her. I liked her. That was the whole relationship for the first six weeks.

It was somewhere in week seven that she started telling me about the hall.

Not all at once, and not like a story with a beginning — more the way people who are dying tend to talk, in loops, coming back to the same three or four rooms in their memory from different doors. There'd been a hall, she said. Second floor above a tailor's shop, forty minutes from here, gone now, torn down for a parking structure sometime in the eighties. Kerim and some other men from the old country had kept it going for years, unofficially, no sign on the door, just a room with a good wood floor and a landlord who didn't ask questions as long as the rent came on the first. They'd do the turn there. Not the version I'd later see performed in a theater with lighting cues — this was smaller, poorer, more like a church basement than a stage. Robes that were really just white sheets, hemmed by someone's wife. A cassette player instead of live musicians, half the time.

"You don't do it to see something," she told me once, when I asked, carefully, what it had actually been like — because by then I was asking, and I want to be honest that I don't know exactly when curiosity turned into the beginning of an appetite. "People think you close your eyes and you see God, like a movie. No. You don't see anything. You feel the weight go out of your hands." She held hers up, thin as paper, the right one lifted a little higher than the left, an old habit her body still knew even flat on a hospital bed. "This one takes. This one gives it back to the ground. That's all.

That's the whole thing anybody needs to know, and nobody believes it's that simple, so they go looking for more."

She told me the word for it once — dervish — and what it meant literally, which surprised me: doorway. Not seeker, not saint. Doorway. A thing things pass through. I didn't know what to do with that at the time. I wrote it on a Post-it and stuck it to my dashboard and didn't think about it again for months.

She died on a Tuesday in March, at 4:51 in the morning, with her daughter asleep in the recliner and me in the chair by the window because that was my shift and that was my chair. It was an ordinary death, by which I mean nothing dramatic happened, which is true of almost all of them and which nobody who hasn't sat in the chair believes. Her breathing did the thing it does at the end, the long gap and then the small catching breath that isn't really breathing anymore, just a reflex running down like a wound clock. Then it didn't come back. I sat with that for a while before I said anything to anyone, the way you do, giving the room its privacy.

Her daughter didn't want the box.

That's the plain fact of how I ended up with it — not some ceremony, not a bequest, just a woman standing in a hallway three weeks later holding a shoebox out to me like it was something she'd found under a car seat. She talked about you a lot. I don't know what half this stuff is. You want it, or should I just— and she made a gesture toward a garbage bag on the floor that already had a lamp in it.

I took the box.

In it: a cassette tape with a label worn illegible, a photograph of a room full of men in white with their arms lifted unevenly, the flash catching one of them mid-turn so his skirt had gone to a blur, a string of worn wooden beads, and a folded square of white cotton, hemmed by hand, that I understood without being told was a scrap of the fabric from the hall — kept, for some reason, for thirty years, by a woman who never went back.

I didn't do anything with it for a while. It sat on top of my dresser. I'd look at it some nights the way you look at a phone number

you're not going to call, just to prove to yourself you still have the option.

Then one night in April, alone in my kitchen at close to two in the morning, hum going full volume, unable to locate a single reason to be standing where I was standing, I put the tape into an old boombox I still had from college, and a reed instrument started playing something that had no verses and no chorus and didn't seem to be going anywhere in particular, and without deciding to, I lifted my right hand a little higher than my left, and turned once.

I hit the counter with my hip on the way around and knocked a glass into the sink, where it didn't break, which felt at the time like it should have meant something.

It didn't. It just meant I was clumsy, and standing in a kitchen at two a.m. holding my hands like an old dead woman had taught me to without ever once teaching me, and that the sound in my left ear, for exactly the four seconds I was off my feet, had gone quiet.

That was enough. That was the whole reason. I want to be honest about how small it was.

TWO: THE DIREK

I did what anybody does now, which is start with the internet, and the internet gave me exactly what you'd expect — tourist footage from Istanbul, robes lit in blue and gold, a narrator with a British accent explaining “mystical union” over swelling strings, comment sections arguing about whether it was appropriative to watch. None of it told me anything about the hip. None of it told me what to do with my feet.

I found better material in a library two towns over that still had an actual religion and folklore section instead of just self-help: a thin, dry, out-of-print monograph by an academic who'd spent a decade with a lodge in Konya, mostly interested in the poetry, but with one chapter — fourteen pages — on the mechanics. That chapter I read more times than I've read anything since college. The left foot has a name: direk. The pole. It plants, flat, weight centered between the ball and the heel, and it does not lift, not once, for the entire

duration of the turn. The right foot is the çark — the wheel — and it's the right foot that does the actual work, pushing off the floor in a small controlled arc, over and over, while the left stays exactly where God, or gravity, or thirty years of practice put it.

The rest I pieced together the way you'd reconstruct a language from fragments: the head tilts, a small amount, toward the right shoulder, which does something to the fluid in the inner ear that keeps the vertigo from compounding on itself turn after turn. The eyes stay half open, unfocused, fixed on a single point — traditionally your own left thumb, which travels with you, so that you're not watching a room spin around a fixed you, you're watching a fixed thumb around which an unimportant room happens to be moving. And when you stop — this was the part that mattered most, it turned out, the part nobody puts in the tourist footage — you don't just stop. You plant, and you find one spot on the floor with your eyes, and you hold it, absolutely still, sometimes for a full minute, while your body finishes arguing with itself about which way is down.

I drove three and a half hours to a cultural center outside Cedar Rapids that ran an actual Sema twice a year, open to the public as observers only, no participation for anyone not already part of the order. I sat in the back on a folding chair with maybe thirty other people, half of them clearly there for the same reason I was — some private hunger they weren't going to name out loud in a room like that — and I watched men who had trained for years do, in twenty unbroken minutes, what I would spend the next four months failing to do for twenty unbroken seconds.

Afterward I found the teacher. Not the sheikh, not anyone senior — a man named Rasim who taught the beginners' movement class on Tuesdays and had the patience of someone who'd clearly had this conversation before with people exactly like me. I didn't lie to him. I told him what I wanted it for, more or less — the hum, the sitting in the room, the box on my dresser — and he listened the whole way through without his face doing much of anything, and then he said something I wrote down in the car afterward so I wouldn't lose the exact words.

You're asking me for the technique without the remembrance. People do this. It's not forbidden, it's just — incomplete. You can take a wheel off a car and it'll still roll if you push it. It just won't know where it's going, and neither will you, and eventually something you didn't account for will get in front of it.

He gave me the four rules anyway. Spine straight, an axis you build the rest of the turn around. Turn left, toward the heart, slow — the speed comes on its own, eventually, you don't reach for it. Eyes open, unfocused, level. And when you stop: find your spot, and don't move until the room agrees to stop moving with you.

Then he told me, not unkindly, that he hoped I'd find whatever I was looking for, and that he didn't think it would be this, and I drove the three and a half hours home not agreeing with him, which is its own kind of arrogance I can see clearly now and couldn't see at all then.

What followed was four months of a grown man falling down in his own apartment.

I cleared the living room — not much clearing required, I didn't own much — and practiced most nights after work, on an empty stomach because I'd read somewhere that a full one made the vertigo worse and it turned out to be true. The first weeks I got four, five turns in before the room tilted sideways and I sat down hard, sometimes hard enough to bruise, once hard enough that I limped for three days and told the agency I'd hurt myself moving furniture. I threw up more than once, quietly, into the kitchen sink, and stood there afterward with the water running, telling myself the same thing I told myself in hospice rooms — that discomfort wasn't information, that the body complaining wasn't the same as the body being right.

The direk foot was the hardest thing. Everything in a person's ordinary walking life fights the idea of a foot that doesn't move. I built a bruise on the outside edge of my left heel that never quite healed before I re-bruised it, a callus eventually, a permanent small deformation I still have. I practiced the arm-lift separately from the turn for two full weeks before combining them, because Rasim had told me — almost in passing, like it wasn't the whole secret — that

people who raise their arms too fast turn the exercise into a stunt instead of a practice, and stunts are exactly the kind of thing a body throws you off of.

I didn't take a real sikke, the felt hat, or a real tennure, the long skirt. It felt like theft to even consider it — not a legal theft, nobody was going to stop me, but the other kind, the kind Rasim had already warned me about without using the word. I sewed a plain white shirt long enough to move in and a length of white cotton I wrapped and belted myself, badly, the first six times, until I found a way that held. No hat. Bare head felt correct in a way I couldn't have defended in an argument. I hadn't earned the hat. I wasn't sure I'd earned anything, but the hat felt like a specific kind of lie I wasn't willing to tell, even alone, even to nobody.

The night it changed was a Thursday, unremarkable, nothing I'd done differently. I'd gotten to maybe forty seconds by then on a good night, which had started to feel like a ceiling. I put the tape in — I was still using Nurgül's tape, always, every time, some superstition I never examined — and went through the four rules the way you go through a checklist before you stop needing the checklist, and turned, and somewhere past the point where the room usually started arguing with me, it didn't.

It went white at the edges instead of sideways. The reed sound stopped being something I was hearing and became something closer to a shape I was standing inside of. And there was a version of me — I don't have a cleaner way to say this — standing very still just behind my own sternum, watching the rest of me turn, entirely unbothered, the way you'd watch rain from a dry porch.

I don't know how long it lasted. Long enough that when I finally found my floor spot and stopped and rode out the vertigo the way I'd been taught, my legs were shaking not from fear but from something closer to the ache after you've been holding a long note in singing — a muscle that's done real work.

I sat down on my own kitchen floor afterward, in the dark, in a stranger's borrowed shirt, and understood, with a clarity that embarrassed me a little even as I felt it, that the hum behind my

left ear had gone all the way quiet for the first time since I could remember it existing.

It came back an hour later. But it had left, and come back, which was new, and which was the only piece of information I actually needed.

I didn't know yet what it had taken with it when it left, or where it had put it down. That part came later, and it came from other people, and by the time I understood what I'd actually built in that apartment, I'd already had visitors sitting against my wall for the better part of a year.

INTERLUDE: THE OTHER STUDENT

I don't know his name. Rasim never used it in front of the rest of us, and the man himself never offered it, not that day, standing at the back of the room with his coat still on, watching the Sema the way you watch weather you're not sure you're allowed to want.

I'd been coming to Rasim's Tuesday class for two years by then, slow ordinary progress, the kind that doesn't make a story — I could hold a turn maybe ninety seconds without embarrassing myself, which had taken most of those two years to earn. I noticed him because he stayed after, once the folding chairs were already being stacked, and asked Rasim a question in a voice pitched too low for the rest of us to hear, though I caught enough of it to understand it wasn't really a question. It was closer to a confession dressed up as one.

Rasim gave him the four rules anyway. I watched him write them down on the back of a gas station receipt, the only paper he had on him, like a man taking directions to somewhere he had no intention of telling anyone he was going.

I thought about him for months afterward, on and off, the way you think about someone you saw exactly once at exactly the wrong angle to ever recognize again. Rasim mentioned him only one more time, maybe a year later, in the offhand way teachers mention students they're worried about without quite saying so: somebody's out there running the wheel without the car. None of us asked what

he meant. I understood it anyway, the same way you understand weather.

I don't know what happened to him. I hope, whatever it was, it was worth the receipt.

THREE: THE FIRST ONE

It was Priya who sent him.

Priya worked intake at the agency, which meant she was the one who called families at the worst possible hour of their lives and asked them, gently, to make decisions no one should have to make on four hours of sleep. We weren't close, exactly, but we'd covered shifts for each other, and at some point during a slow Tuesday she'd caught me rubbing the outside of my left heel through my sock — an old habit, the callus had started aching in cold weather like a bone that remembered being broken — and asked what I'd done to it. I told her some of the truth. Not all of it. Enough that a month later, when her uncle Gene lost his wife of forty-one years and stopped sleeping and stopped, according to Priya, being able to sit in a room without his hands shaking, she asked me if I could see him.

I want to be clear that I didn't know what I was agreeing to when I said yes. I thought I was agreeing to let a grieving man watch me do something strange in my apartment, the way you'd let someone watch you fish, in case the quiet helped. I didn't know yet that it would help. I hadn't done it in front of anyone.

Gene was seventy-one, a retired machinist, built like someone who'd spent a life around equipment that could take a finger off if you weren't paying attention — careful hands, careful voice. He came on a Thursday in October, in a coat too heavy for the weather, and sat where I told him to sit, which was against the wall by the window, on a folding chair I'd bought for exactly this and not admitted to myself why. He didn't ask what I was going to do. Priya must have told him not to ask, or he'd already stopped expecting explanations to fix anything, which is its own kind of education grief gives people.

The apartment itself was nothing to speak of, which was exactly what had recommended it to me. One bedroom, cinder block and drywall, a kitchen too small to turn around in, which was fine, since turning around wasn't work I did in the kitchen anymore. I owned almost no furniture, by design rather than poverty — a mattress, a chair I never sat in, a bookshelf with more hospice paperwork on it than books. The one deliberate object in the whole place was the rug.

I'd bought it the same spring as the first turn, from an estate sale two buildings over, seven dollars, because the woman running the sale wanted it gone before the movers came and I happened to be standing there with cash. Persian, or made to look it — I never had it appraised and didn't want to, the way you don't get a keepsake authenticated if part of what you love about it is not entirely knowing. Deep red going to rust at the edges, a central medallion radiating outward in eight points like a compass rose, or a wheel, or a sun if you were inclined to see it that way, which I became, eventually, without ever deciding to. I laid it in the center of the one room I had to spare and built the rest of my life in that apartment around not stepping on it except to turn.

It became, without my planning it, the actual boundary of the practice — visitors sat outside its edge, on the folding chair against the wall, and I turned inside it, my direk foot planted somewhere near its center more nights than not, the pattern wearing thin under one specific heel in a way no other part of the rug did. Nurgül never saw it. I've wondered, more than once, what she would have made of a stranger's cast-off rug becoming the one fixed geography in a room otherwise empty on purpose.

I hadn't eaten since noon. That part isn't optional — a full stomach and the turn don't share space well, something about blood and balance I never fully understood and never needed to, because the men who taught it to each other for six hundred years had already worked out that you go into it hollow. I'd cleared the living room down to the floor, one lamp on, the rest of the apartment dark behind it, and I'd put the tape in already, cued to the start, the reed

instrument sitting silent on the pause the way it always sat before I pressed play, like something holding its breath along with me.

I was in the shirt and the wrap by then, barefoot, no hat. Gene looked at the outfit for exactly one second — long enough to register it, not long enough to be rude about it — and then looked at his hands in his lap, and I understood he'd already decided not to need this explained to him, which was its own kind of gift.

I pressed play.

The ney came in the way it always came in, alone, no percussion yet, a single unbroken line of breath shaped into a sound that doesn't resolve the way Western music resolves — it climbs and hovers and climbs again, refusing to land anywhere you'd call a chord, so that some part of the ear keeps leaning forward waiting for a resolution that isn't coming, and that leaning-forward, unresolved feeling is doing work before you've even lifted your arms.

I set my left foot. The direk. Flat, weight centered between ball and heel, and from the moment it landed there it would not move again until the whole thing was over — everything else in the next twenty minutes would happen around that one fixed point, the way a room happens around a nail in the wall.

I turned my head twenty-some degrees to the right, chin lifting slightly. Found the spot on my own left thumb where I'd fix my eyes, unfocused, the whole room already going soft at the edges just from that one adjustment, the way things go soft when you stop trying to look directly at them.

I lifted my arms. Slowly — Rasim's voice was still in my head after all those months, people who raise their arms too fast turn the exercise into a stunt — right hand climbing past level, palm open to the ceiling, left hand settling low, palm down, toward the floor, toward Gene's chair, toward the room, toward whatever was sitting in it that wasn't mine.

And I pushed off with the right foot. The çark. The wheel.

The first several rotations are always the worst part and always the part I have the least language for, because they're mostly a

negotiation with nausea, a purely mechanical problem the mystical vocabulary doesn't touch at all. The inner ear does not believe you when you tell it, with your eyes and your breathing and your steady unmoving left foot, that this is safe. It sends up its objections in the oldest currency it has, which is the wish to be sick. You ride that out. There isn't a trick past riding it out. Somewhere around the eighth or ninth turn — I've never counted, I only know it by feel — the objections start to lose their footing faster than you do, and the room, instead of lurching, starts to smear.

That's the word I'd use if I had to use one. Smear. Not spin — spinning is what happens to the room when you're falling, and I wasn't falling. The lamp became a low gold line instead of a lamp. The window became a pale vertical stripe. Gene became a shape, seated, unmoving, the one truly still thing in a field of softened light, the way the moon stays put while clouds drag past it.

And then — later, always later, never on a schedule I could predict — the smear stopped being visual at all and became something more like weather. That's the closest comparison I've ever found and I've had years now to look for a better one. Not a picture. A pressure system. The awareness, not visual, not auditory, closer to what you feel when a storm front is still an hour off but your sinuses already know it's coming — of something large and specific occupying the room with a shape to it, and the shape had a source, and the source was seven feet away in a folding chair wearing a coat too heavy for October.

I felt it enter — and I want to be careful here, because I've turned this sentence over more times than any other sentence in my life trying to find one that isn't a lie in either direction, one that doesn't oversell what happened and doesn't undersell it either — I felt it enter through my right hand. Not symbolically. Not the way you'd say grief "entered" a room in a poem. A specific, located, physical sensation, low-grade and electrical, starting in the palm of the hand that was open to the ceiling and moving, with the turn, down through the wrist, the forearm, across the chest on a diagonal that followed the axis of my own spine, the axis Rasim had spent an entire Tuesday teaching me to find and hold — down through that

axis, through the hips, through the leg that was still turning, and out, finally, through the other hand, the low one, the one facing the floor, into the actual physical floor of my actual physical apartment, into the joists and the concrete and whatever was under that.

It did not feel like insight. That's important. I didn't see Gene's wife. I didn't receive a message. What moved through me had no content I could have described afterward to a friend over coffee — no scene, no voice, no picture of a woman I'd never met. It had weight, and direction, and a kind of granular, specific texture that I can only describe as particular — the way a stranger's coat, worn for years, holds the exact shape of a body you've never seen and could not draw, but you'd know instantly if you tried on a different coat that it wasn't the same weight. It was his. Whatever it was, it was unmistakably, specifically his, and it moved through the fixed point of my spine and out into the ground, and I did not keep any of it, and I did not choose not to keep it — the whole design, the only design, the entire six-hundred-year-old machinery of the thing, is built so that you don't have a choice in the matter. The pole doesn't decide what it grounds.

I don't know how long that lasted. Time inside the turn stops behaving the way it behaves in a folding chair. It compresses in one direction and drags in another — I've had turns that felt like ninety seconds and ran twenty-two minutes on the tape counter, and I've had the reverse, three minutes that felt like most of an afternoon.

What ends it, every time, is the tape. Not a decision. The ney runs out, the room goes quiet except for the hiss of blank leader, and something in my body that had stopped being mine for a while starts, very slowly, to come back to being mine.

I planted. Found my one spot on the floor — a knot in the wood grain, three feet to the left of where Gene's chair sat, the same knot every single time after that first night, because a point you already know is easier to hold than a point you have to find — and I did not move again, not an inch, while the room finished arguing with itself about which way was down. That part isn't graceful. Nobody tells you that part isn't graceful. I stood there swaying very slightly, jaw tight, sweat gone cold on my neck, staring at a knot in

cheap apartment flooring like it owed me money, for what was probably close to a full minute, until the smear resolved itself back into a lamp, a window, a man in a coat.

Gene was crying. Not loudly. Not in a way that seemed to require anything from me. He had his forearms on his knees and his head down and his shoulders were doing the small, contained, adult version of it — the version people do when they've spent forty years learning not to be a burden even to their own grief — and he didn't look up at me for a while, and I didn't make him.

When he did look up, he said, "I don't know what that was," which I understood wasn't a question, and I said, "I don't either," which was true, and has stayed true, every single time since, no matter how many times I've been asked.

He left maybe ten minutes later. Didn't hug me. Shook my hand at the door, which felt correct, formal in a way that matched something in him, and said thank you twice, and walked to his car a little more slowly than a man his age should have needed to, but steadily. I never asked Priya how he was after. I've learned, since, not to ask. It isn't mine to follow home.

What I didn't tell him, what I've never told any of them, is what the rest of that night was like from where I was standing.

The quiet — the specific quiet, the four-second kitchen quiet I'd first felt in April — didn't come. What came instead, once the door closed and I was alone in the apartment with the lamp still on and the tape still hissing on its dead leader, was a kind of hollowness that took me almost an hour to identify correctly, because my first instinct was to call it peace and it wasn't peace. Peace has a floor to it. This didn't. My legs ached the specific ache of the hip flexor and the outside of the left foot, the ordinary athletic cost of the thing, and under that, deeper, was something closer to having given blood — a real, measurable, physiological absence where something had been sitting an hour before. I was cold in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. I ate standing at the counter, not tasting it, the way you eat after a fast, mechanically, because the body has requested fuel and you've

learned to listen to that request even when nothing in you particularly wants to be alive at that exact moment.

I slept eleven hours. I hadn't slept eleven hours since before the job, since before any of it, since I was young enough that sleep was still something that simply happened to a person instead of something you had to build a whole architecture around chasing.

And the hum — the frequency, the refrigerator sound behind my left ear that had been there so long I'd stopped being able to remember what quiet even should have felt like — the hum was gone in the morning. Not faded. Gone, the way a room goes quiet when an appliance you never noticed finally shuts off, and you stand there in the new silence trying to work out what's different, and it takes a second, and then it takes your whole chest.

It came back three days later. I want to say that plainly too, because everything that follows in this book is, in one way or another, about what happens to a person who has been shown, once, exactly what quiet feels like, and then has it taken back, on a schedule he doesn't control, by a mechanism he doesn't fully understand and can't, no matter how much he practices, learn to run in reverse.

I didn't know yet that Gene would tell his sister. That his sister would tell a woman from her church whose son had been missing four years. That within five months I would stop being able to remember which Thursday belonged to which grief, and would start keeping a small spiral notebook by the door — not names, I never wrote names, just a date and a single word, the word I'd land on afterward if someone made me summarize what I'd carried out to the knot in the floor and put down.

I didn't know any of that yet. That night I only knew the quiet had a price, and that I'd already decided, without quite deciding, that I was going to keep paying it.

FOUR: THE LEDGER

By the second winter I'd stopped calling it anything to myself. Not a practice, not a service, not a gift — those all implied a decision I didn't remember making. It was just Thursdays, mostly, sometimes a second night if someone's need didn't respect a schedule, and it was the notebook by the door, and it was the particular, private arithmetic of an empty stomach and a cleared floor and a tape that was starting, after two winters of use, to develop a faint warble on the second Selam that I'd learned to turn through instead of around.

Priya's sister-in-law's cousin. A man from the hospice's grief group who'd gotten my number from somebody who wasn't supposed to have it. A woman named Odalys who ran the register at the pharmacy where I filled a prescription I'd started needing for the headaches, who noticed something in my face one Tuesday and asked, point blank, over the counter, in front of a line of people, "Are you the one who does the thing." I never advertised. I never once said yes to that question directly. I just started clearing the floor an extra night a week and stopped being surprised when the knock came.

The notebook has forty-one entries in it by the winter I'm describing now. I never wrote names. That was a rule from the beginning, one of the only rules I kept the whole way through — not because I thought anonymity protected them, exactly, but because I understood, without being able to defend it in an argument, that carrying a name out to the knot in the floor was a different kind of theft than carrying a shape. A name is a whole person. What moved through me was never a whole person. It was one specific, load-bearing piece of one, the piece they couldn't put down themselves, and giving it a word instead of a name was the only boundary I had the discipline to hold onto.

Son. That was Gene, though I didn't write it that night — I added it weeks later, once I understood the notebook needed to exist at all, once the number of Thursdays had outgrown what I could keep straight in my own head without some kind of ledger. Overdose. Fire. The accident, not hers. That last one I remember writing at

four in the morning, hand shaking, after a session with a woman whose husband had died in a car her teenage son had been driving, and who had spent eleven months being furious at a boy who was also, unmistakably, the only thing she had left in the world, and who could not say that fury out loud to a single living person because it would have finished the boy off completely if she had. What moved through me that night had two textures instead of one, braided together, grief and rage refusing to unwind from each other even on their way out through my hand into the floor, and I remember standing at the knot afterward for nearly two full minutes before the room agreed to be a room again.

Those four were only ever the ones easiest to compress into a word. Most of them needed more room than the notebook gave, and some nights, lying awake with the hum doing its low work behind my ear, I'd walk back through the ones I hadn't written down right, the way you'd walk back through a house checking that you'd actually locked every door.

There was a locksmith, a heavysset man who never told me his name and didn't need to, who'd spent thirty-one years teaching his hands the specific give of other people's tumblers, the exact pressure a pin needs before it seats. On the one night his own brother stood outside a door that needed opening at two in the morning, he'd sat in his truck at the curb telling himself it wasn't his business, that a grown man pounding on his own front door was a domestic matter and not a locksmith's. His brother was dead by morning, on the far side of a door the man could have opened in nine seconds. What moved through my hand that night didn't have grief's ordinary downward pull at all. It had the specific, needling quality of a key that fits and won't turn, and I understood, standing at my knot in the floor afterward, that some griefs aren't about loss. They're about a competence that arrived nine seconds too late to matter, which may be a harder thing to carry than loss is, because loss at least has the decency to be nobody's fault.

There was an old fisherman, decades off the boats by the time I met him, who told me about a net that had gone into a bad sea with a man tangled in it, and a decision that had taken him under four

seconds to make and that he had been re-making every day since: cut the net free, save the boat and the two men still standing on the deck, and let the sea keep the third. He'd done the arithmetic right. Everyone who ever investigated it agreed he'd done the arithmetic right. What came off him wasn't guilt in the ordinary sense. It was closer to the specific horror of having been correct — of having made the one defensible choice available, and discovering that defensibility is not the same thing as forgiveness, not from the sea and not from himself. I wrote the net in the notebook and nothing else, because nothing else fit, and because by then I'd started to suspect that the worst griefs in my apartment weren't the ones born from doing wrong. They were the ones born from doing right, exactly right, and finding out the universe keeps no receipts for that.

There was a midwife who came twice, a year apart, which almost never happened — most of them couldn't stand to sit again with whatever they'd have to hand me a second time. She'd delivered, by her own rough count, upward of four thousand children over thirty years, and carried in her hands, she told me, the specific weight of the one she hadn't been able to save, a boy decades gone now whose name she still knew and whose family she'd stopped being able to face at the grocery store in the small town where she'd delivered half of everyone. What moved through her and into me, both times, had an odd, doubled quality — grief braided so tightly with love for the four thousand that I couldn't always tell, mid-turn, which strand was which. I remember thinking, both times, that she and I were doing versions of the same impossible arithmetic: hers counted in bodies she'd caught, mine counted in Thursdays, both of us keeping a ledger that could never balance, because the one column always outweighs anything the other side has to offer against it.

Not everyone came once. Most did — a single Thursday, a single word earned and entered, done. But twice in those years someone came back again and again, week after week, until what I had with them stopped being a session and became something closer to what Rasim would have called, if he'd ever seen it, a course of treatment, though neither of us would ever have used that phrase.

Roshan came six times over four months, always on Thursdays, always sitting a little farther from the rug's edge than anyone else ever had, as if she wasn't sure she'd earned the right to sit as close as the folding chair allowed. She was younger than most of my visitors, thirty maybe, and she told me almost nothing about herself directly — I only learned what I learned because grief, given enough repetition, starts leaking around its own edges even when a person is trying hard to keep it contained.

What I pieced together, over six Thursdays: her family kept a flame. Not literally, not anymore, not since her grandparents' generation had left Yazd for a colder country, but there had been, in her childhood, a small oil lamp in a corner of her father's study that was never, under any circumstance, allowed to go out — refilled quietly, tended without ceremony, a practice so folded into ordinary life that she told me she hadn't understood it was a practice, a fragment of something much older, until she was already an adult and her father was already dying and the lamp had already, somewhere in the exhausting logistics of his last month, gone out without either of them noticing exactly when.

She believed — not loudly, not as doctrine, more the way you believe a thing your body decided before your mind agreed to it — that some guardian piece of him, something her family had always called by an old word she wouldn't teach me, had needed that flame the way a plant needs water, and that letting it lapse in his last weeks had left a piece of him untended right at the moment he could least afford it. She used two words, once, on her third or fourth Thursday, that I looked up afterward and have never forgotten: *asha*, which I found glossed as something like truth, or right order, the shape the world is supposed to hold; and its shadow, *druj*, disorder, the lie, the thing that moves in wherever *asha* isn't being tended. She said the second word only once, very quietly, about herself, and at the time I took it to be about the lamp. It wasn't only about the lamp.

The lamp, it turned out over the later Thursdays, was the story she led with because it was the one with a shape small enough to hand a stranger without the stranger needing to be brave to receive it.

The rest came slower, in pieces she never assembled into one telling, and I want to be honest that some of the assembling has been mine, done afterward, alone, the way you piece together a shattered plate from the handful of shards someone's willing to hand you and a guess at the shape that must have held them together.

She had been arrested at a demonstration in her early twenties, one of thousands taken in that particular wave, and held for four months in a facility she never named for me, not once, in six Thursdays. Whatever happened to her inside those four months she never described directly, and I never once asked her to. What she told me, the one time she came near the center of it, was that she came out of that building pregnant, and that she had decided, before she was even fully free of the country that had done this to her, that she was going to keep the child.

Her husband had spent those four months outside the walls doing what the outside of a prison lets a person do, which is nothing — paying men who promised information and delivered none, standing in lines that led nowhere, waiting. He didn't know about the pregnancy until after. What he came to believe, in the weeks between her release and his death, was that whatever had happened to her inside had happened because of some door he hadn't managed to get open, some help he hadn't found the money or the courage for fast enough. I don't know if that belief was fair to him. I've never been in a position to judge it. I only know he was gone before their daughter was born, and that Roshan left the country within the year, alone, carrying a grief that already had three separate rooms in it before she ever found her way to my apartment — her father's flame, her husband's absence, and a fourth thing she never gave a room to at all, that she kept, as far as I could tell, entirely without walls, loose in her the way water is loose in a cracked container.

That fourth thing was the one my hands never got a clean read on, the six times she came. It didn't move the way the others moved. Grief, even complicated grief, even Faye's, even the fisherman's, still had a direction to it, a place it was trying to go. What was in

Roshan sometimes didn't behave like grief at all. It behaved like something stored below the level where grief operates, in whatever part of a body keeps the actual record of a thing after the mind has done what it can to file it away as a memory instead of a location. I don't have the training to know if that's a real distinction or one I invented to make sense of what my hands were reporting. I only know that four separate times, mid-turn, I felt something with no story attached to it at all — no scene, no face, nothing my hand could translate into the kind of single word the notebook wanted — just pressure, specific and located, the way scar tissue holds the shape of a wound long after the wound itself has become only a story other people tell about you.

I've wondered since whether that's the real reason the turning ever helped her, insofar as it helped her at all. Talking couldn't reach it — she told me once, in the only sentence she ever gave me directly about any of this, that she'd sat across from three different doctors in two different countries and given all three the same careful, bloodless account, and that none of them had ever once made the thing in her body go quiet, even for an hour. What the turning offered wasn't an account. It didn't ask her body to become a story. It only asked her body to move, in a shape older than language, and whatever was living below where language reaches seemed to recognize that older invitation even when it had never once answered a therapist's question.

I never told her that what moved through my hand on those six Thursdays had its own strange orderliness to it — not barbed, like Faye's, not resistant. It came the way a tide comes, in and then, eventually, out, six separate ebbings of the same water, each one taking a little less with it than the last, until the sixth Thursday, when what came through was so faint I nearly missed it, more habit than weight by then. She didn't come a seventh time, and unlike most of the others, I don't think that was because there was nothing left. I think she'd taken what a body can take from twenty minutes of turning, four months running, and understood, the way you understand the limit of any tool, that the rest of it — her daughter, the life she was building in a country that had never once

asked her a single hard question — was going to have to be carried a different way, on her own two feet, and not on my floor.

The other one, I only saw once, and what happened that night rearranged something in how I understood my own work that I'm still not finished rearranging.

He came recommended the ordinary way, a name passed through the notebook's underground current, gave me nothing at the door, sat where I told him, and waited while I went through the four rules the way I always did, hollow-stomached, tape cued, lamp on, the rug holding its old red geometry in the low light between us.

I assumed, because I had never once had a reason not to assume it, that whatever was sitting in that chair belonged to someone he'd lost. That was the whole shape of the work, as I understood it after years of doing it: a living person, a missing person, a weight passed from the second party to the first and then, through me, into the ground. I had never once turned for a grief that didn't have a dead or absent other end.

Somewhere around the tenth rotation, the weather that moved into the room didn't have that shape at all. There was no second person in it. No absence standing behind the presence, the way there always had been — Gene's wife, the locksmith's brother, the boy the midwife couldn't save. What moved through my hand that night belonged, entirely and only, to the man seven feet away, still alive, still breathing, sitting in my folding chair with his hands in his lap — and I understood, mid-turn, badly, in the disoriented half-formed way you understand things while your body is still arguing with the room, that I was turning out a man's grief for his own life, in advance of losing it, the specific weight of a person mourning himself while there was still time left to do the mourning in.

I learned afterward, the ordinary secondhand way I learned almost everything, that he'd been given a number of months by a doctor some weeks before he ever knocked on my door. He hadn't come to me to be cured of anything. He'd come, I think, for the same reason the rest of them came — to put down, even briefly, even for the length of one tape, a weight he could not put down alone — except the weight was the whole remaining shape of his own life, and

there was no floor in the world that could hold that permanently. Some nights I think that was the truest session I ever ran, the one that told me plainly what I actually am to the people who sit against my wall. Not a cure. Not a priest. Just a place a person can set something down for twenty minutes before they have to pick it back up and carry it out the door with them, because I was never able to keep more than the twenty minutes' worth. That part was never mine to give.

Forty-one entries by that second winter, and by then I'd stopped believing the notebook was a record of what I'd done for other people. It was closer to a proof of one narrow claim: that grief is not a single thing wearing different coats, the way the pamphlets like to promise, five stages, one universal machinery. Every entry in that notebook was its own physics. Some fell straight down, glad to go, the way water wants a drain. Some resisted the whole direction of the exercise, the way the net did, the way Faye's eventually would. A single word was never going to be adequate to any of it, and I knew that every time I wrote one down, and wrote one down anyway — because the alternative, trusting my own memory to hold forty-one separate architectures of loss without letting them bleed into each other, seemed like the greater dishonesty. The notebook was never really a ledger of what left them. It was a ledger of my own limits: an admission, in my own handwriting, that I could only hold the true shape of a thing for as long as it took to turn it back out of me, and not one page longer.

The tolerance built the way any tolerance builds, which is quietly, and which you only notice in retrospect by comparing a photograph of where you started to where you've ended up. Forty seconds had once been a ceiling I couldn't imagine breaking. By that second winter a session ran twenty minutes as a matter of course, sometimes thirty, and I'd stopped being able to reliably locate the exact moment the smear turned to weather — it happened faster now, the way any skill compresses with repetition, and I told myself the speed was competence and didn't examine very hard whether it was also something closer to a habit finding its shortest path to the same relief.

I quit the hospice job in November of that second year. I want to be honest about how I explained it to myself at the time, because the explanation was a lie built out of true pieces. I told my supervisor I was burned out, which was true. I told Priya I needed a break from being around death professionally, which was also true, and which she didn't push back on, though I caught her looking at me sometimes the way you look at someone you've started to worry about but haven't found the sentence for yet. What I didn't say to either of them, because I hadn't said it to myself yet, was that I had simply moved the same work into my apartment, off the books, unpaid, and that some part of me had made a trade I didn't remember agreeing to — trading a job that let me go home at the end of a shift for one that didn't have a shift at all, that just had a door and a knock and a notebook filling up faster than the pages in it could really hold.

I broke my own rules one at a time, the way you always do, each break small enough to justify on its own. I stopped fasting a full twelve hours beforehand — six felt like enough, and it was, until one night it wasn't, and I spent forty minutes afterward on my bathroom floor instead of my kitchen floor, which felt like a distinction that should have meant more to me than it did. I let a second visitor come the same week as a first, then the same week as a second, then — once, only once, I told myself, and told myself again every week after that it would stay once — two in a single night, an hour apart, no real recovery between them, the second one leaving me so hollowed I don't fully remember driving Priya's cousin's friend to her car afterward, though her thank-you note is still somewhere in a drawer, so I must have.

I want to say I saw the shape of what was coming. I didn't. I saw the notebook getting fuller and told myself that was the job doing its job. I saw the headaches getting worse and filled the prescription and didn't connect it to anything. I saw my own hands shaking sometimes, hours after a session, on nights when no session had even happened, and told myself that was just a body getting older, forty being closer than I liked to admit.

What I didn't see coming, because there was no version of the notebook that could have warned me, was that eventually one of the forty-one would carry something that wouldn't go where the others had gone.

FIVE: FAYE

She came on a Thursday in February, recommended by nobody I could later identify — she simply knew, the way people simply knew by then, some current running underground through a city I'd never mapped and couldn't have drawn if you'd asked me to. Faye. Fifty-something, a schoolteacher on leave, dressed like she'd come straight from somewhere she hadn't wanted to be seen leaving. She sat in the folding chair the way they all sat, hands in her lap, and she didn't tell me what she was carrying, which was normal — almost none of them told me, that wasn't the arrangement, the arrangement was silence on both sides — but something in the way she held her own hands, one folded tight over the other like she was keeping the top one from doing something, made the hum behind my ear tick up a half-step before I'd even lifted my arms.

I should have asked her to leave. I understood that clearly within the first four minutes of the turn, and I want to put that on the record here rather than let the rest of this chapter make it sound like I had no warning.

The weather that entered through my right hand that night didn't have the texture the others had. It wasn't heavy in the way grief is heavy, a downward pull, something that wants to go into the ground and is glad, in its way, to finally be allowed to. This had a different shape entirely — barbed is the closest word, something that resisted the direction it was supposed to travel, that caught instead of flowed, the way a fishhook catches instead of a stone sinking. I felt it lodge somewhere around the center of my chest, on the exact line of the spinal axis I'd spent years teaching my body to keep open and clear, and it did not continue on to my left hand. It stayed.

I finished the session anyway. I don't fully know why — momentum, maybe, or the simple animal refusal to stop a process my body had

learned to associate with relief, even as every part of that same body was reporting, in real time, that this particular instance wasn't behaving the way the others had. I found my knot in the floor. I held it. The room came back the way it always came back.

Faye was not crying when I opened my eyes. She was looking at me — really looking, the way none of the others had, most of them too far inside their own aftermath to spare attention for mine — and she said, quietly, “You look wrong,” and left without the usual ten minutes of sitting, without the handshake, without even taking the water I always offered.

I understood, standing alone in my apartment afterward, that whatever it was, it hadn't gone into the floor. It had gone into me instead, and stayed.

I later learned — not that night, not from her, I never saw Faye again and never tried to find her, some other underground current carried the fact to me weeks later through Priya's grapevine, secondhand and unconfirmed and probably not even accurate in its particulars — that her son had died of an overdose in her own house while she was two rooms away, awake, and that she had known, for close to an hour before she found him, that something was wrong, and had told herself it was nothing, and had gone back to what she was doing.

I don't know if that's true. I want to be honest about that too. I never verified it, and there's a version of this whole account where I'm simply telling myself a story to explain a physical sensation that had a much more boring cause — three years of sleep deprivation, a body running on fasting and adrenaline finally sending up a symptom with no story attached to it at all. I've never been able to fully choose between those two explanations, and four years later I still can't, and I've come to suspect that not being able to choose is the actual, permanent condition of this — not a puzzle with a solution waiting at the bottom of it, just two accounts that will never resolve into one, sitting next to each other for good.

Whichever it was, something was in my chest that hadn't been there the week before, and it did not leave when the tape ended, and it did not leave in the morning.

SIX: THE WHEEL WITHOUT THE CAR

I tried to turn it back out for eleven days.

Not all at once — I want that on the record, because in the moment none of the individual decisions felt reckless, each one felt like the obvious next adjustment to a technique that had simply stopped working the way it used to. I extended the sessions first. Twenty minutes became forty, forty became closer to an hour, and I told myself the barb just needed more time to work loose, the way anything stuck sometimes needs more time than usual.

When more time didn't move it, I stopped fasting the full window, on the theory — which made no sense even as I was constructing it, but grief and its cousins are not reasonable architects — that maybe the emptiness of my own stomach was somehow competing with the emptiness the technique needed to create elsewhere, and that filling one might free up the other. I ate a full meal an hour before a turn for the first time in three years and was sick within the first six rotations and kept going anyway, which is the part of this I'm least willing to defend.

I stopped honoring the stop. Rasim's four rules had never included an exception, not once, in years of practice, and on the sixth night I broke the fourth one on purpose — didn't find my knot, didn't hold still, let the turn simply run down on its own like a top losing momentum, on the theory that maybe the ritual precision of the stopping was itself the thing keeping the barb in place, some kind of clean edge that needed to be blurred instead of honored. I fell. Hard, onto the same hip that had bruised itself into a permanent low ache four years earlier, and lay on my living room floor for what the clock afterward told me had been eleven minutes, conscious the whole time, unable to convince my legs to be interested in standing.

By the eighth night I wasn't sleeping between attempts. By the tenth I'd stopped answering Priya's texts, which brought her to my door in person on the eleventh, and I remember the conversation only in pieces — her voice going up in register the way it does when someone is frightened and trying not to sound frightened, my own voice sounding, even to me, like it was coming from someplace

slightly to the left of where I actually was. She didn't understand what she was looking at. I didn't have a version of it I could have handed her that wouldn't have sounded like the kind of thing that gets a person committed, and some clear, cold, still-functioning part of my mind understood that and kept me from trying.

I called Rasim on the twelfth day. Four years since I'd last spoken to him, a number I'd kept without examining why. He answered on the fourth ring, and I don't remember exactly what I said to him, only that I didn't manage to make it make sense, and that he let me not make sense for close to a minute before he said the thing I'd been carrying around unspoken since the night in his classroom four years earlier, the sentence I'd driven three and a half hours home from specifically in order to disagree with.

I told you. You took the wheel off the car.

He didn't say it unkindly. That's important. There was no triumph in it, no I-told-you-so satisfaction — if anything his voice had gone gentler than I remembered it, the voice of a man delivering a diagnosis he'd hoped, genuinely, not to have to deliver. He asked me if I was still turning alone, and I said yes, and he was quiet long enough that I thought the call had dropped, and then he said something that I have turned over more times in the months since than almost anything else in this entire account.

The remembrance was never separate from the technique. You built a doorway with no threshold on the other side of it. Things don't stop passing through a doorway like that. They just don't have anywhere to go once they're through, so they stay in the frame.

He offered to help. Not over the phone — he told me to come, that there were people at the lodge who'd dealt with exactly this before, that I wasn't the first person to try to extract the wheel and run it without the rest of the car, that there was a name for what I was carrying in a tradition six hundred years older than my own kitchen floor.

I said I would come.

I didn't go the next day. I told myself it was because I needed to sleep first, and slept fourteen hours, and woke up on the thirteenth

day with the barb still exactly where it had been, no better and, as far as I could tell, no worse either, simply present, the way a scar is present, something the body has apparently decided to keep.

SEVEN: WHAT THE FLOOR AGREED TO KEEP

I never made the drive.

I want to end this honestly rather than end it the way a story wants to be ended, with a resolution that closes the loop and lets everyone go home settled. I didn't drive to the lodge. I didn't call Rasim back, not that week, not the week after, though I've kept the number, the way you keep a door you've decided not to walk through but aren't ready to seal.

What actually happened is smaller and less satisfying than either recovery or collapse. The barb stopped being sharp. It didn't leave — I want to be precise about that, because I've spent four years now checking, the way you check a scar with your thumb to see if it's still there, and it is, a specific pressure just off-center in my chest that I've stopped expecting to move. But it stopped being sharp, the way anything eventually stops being sharp if you carry it long enough, not because it's healed but because the carrying itself becomes the new shape of the thing.

I started turning for visitors again in the spring. I want to be honest that I don't fully understand my own decision to do that, any more than I understood the decision three years earlier not to stop after the first one. Priya asked me once, carefully, months later, whether it was safe, and I told her the truth, which was that I didn't know, and that not knowing had apparently become something I could live inside rather than something that stopped me.

The hum behind my left ear is still there, most days. It's quieter than it was before Nurgül's box came into my life — I can say that much with confidence, four years and a shoebox worth of a tape's wear later. But I've stopped being able to tell, with any real certainty, whether the quiet in me is the kind that comes from a wound being tended, or the kind that comes from a wound going numb, and I've come to suspect those two things don't announce themselves differently from the inside. I've stopped asking the

question every night. I still ask it most Thursdays, usually somewhere around the eighth or ninth rotation, right before the room stops arguing with me and goes to weather instead, and I've never once arrived at an answer before the tape runs out and the choosing gets made for me by a piece of magnetic ribbon that's older than some of the grief it's carried.

EPILOGUE

There's a knock some Thursdays now that I don't remember agreeing to schedule. I've stopped writing names in the notebook, same as always, but I've started writing something new next to the single word — a small mark, a dash, nothing anyone else would recognize as meaning anything, that tells me, privately, whether the weight went where it was supposed to go or whether some small piece of it stayed.

There are more dashes than there used to be. I've stopped believing that's only because I'm getting worse at this, and I've stopped believing it's only because the griefs are getting harder. I think it's simply what four years of a doorway looks like from the inside, once you've stopped being able to remember what the room looked like before you cut the opening into it.

Nurgül's tape still plays. The warble on the second Selam is worse now, a soft wow in the pitch that I could fix in twenty minutes with a computer and a better copy of the recording, and haven't, and don't plan to. I like knowing it's the same imperfect breath of air moving through the same worn ribbon that moved through her hall above the tailor's shop, forty years and a demolished building ago, before any of the men who wore the real hats and the real skirts knew that a stranger they'd never meet would still be standing in it, badly, gratefully, every week, long after all of them were gone too.

Someone is at the door as I write this. I haven't checked the notebook yet to see what day it is.

I'm going to go answer it.

GLOSSARY

Asha [AA-shaa] — Avestan, *truth, right order*. The Zoroastrian principle of the truth that holds a structure together.

Çark [CHAARK] — Turkish, *wheel*. In the turn, the right foot — the one that pushes off the floor in a small repeated arc and does the work of moving the body around its fixed point.

Dervish [DUR-vish] — Persian, *mendicant, one who is poor*. A member of a Sufi order. The sense of a doorway that the narrator is given is a traditional reading of the word rather than the philological one.

Direk [dee-REK] — Turkish, *pole, pillar*. In the turn, the left foot — planted flat, weight centred between ball and heel, and not lifted once for the whole duration.

Druj [DROOJ] — Avestan, *the lie, disorder*. In Zoroastrian thought the opposing principle to asha: what moves in wherever right order is no longer being kept.

Konya [KOHN-yaa] — City in central Anatolia; seat of the Mevlevi order and the site of Rumi's tomb.

Mevlevi [mev-leh-VEE] — Turkish. The Sufi order that grew from the followers of Rumi in thirteenth-century Konya, and whose ceremony is the sema.

Ney [NAY] — Turkish, from Persian, *reed*. An end-blown reed flute, the principal melodic instrument of Mevlevi music.

Selam [seh-LAAM] — Turkish, from Arabic, *greeting, peace*. Each of the four salutes that divide the sema, and by extension each of its movements.

Sema [seh-MAA] — Turkish, from Arabic, *listening, audition*. The Mevlevi ceremony of turning.

Semazen [seh-maa-ZEN] — Turkish, *one who performs the sema*.
The turner in the ceremony.

Sikke [seek-KEH] — Turkish. The tall cylindrical hat of camel-hair
felt worn by a semazen.

Tennure [ten-noo-REH] — Turkish. The long white skirted robe
worn for the sema.

Yazd [YAZD] — City in central Iran, and the historic centre of its
Zoroastrian community.

A hospice aide has spent eleven years sitting in rooms while people die. What the work has left him is a hum behind the left ear, low and constant, that nothing has ever touched.

An old woman leaves him a shoebox: a cassette, a photograph of men in white with their arms lifted unevenly, a folded square of hand-hemmed cotton. He teaches himself the turn out of a library monograph, badly, alone, on a seven-dollar rug in an empty room.

It works. Grief comes in through his raised hand, travels the axis of his spine, and goes out through the low one into the floor. Word spreads. Visitors start sitting against his wall on Thursdays, and the notebook by the door fills up.

Then one of them brings something barbed, that catches instead of flowing, and does not go into the floor. It stays.

The pole doesn't decide what it grounds.

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