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HOLD ME UP TILL THE MORNING

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

HOLD ME UP TILL THE HORN

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 57

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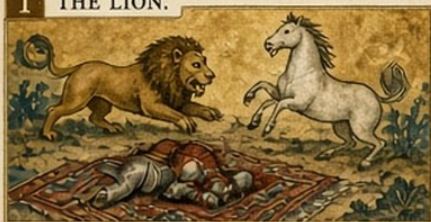
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THE SEVEN TRIALS

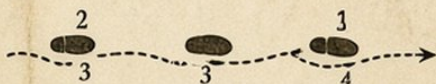
built on the maple of the Rialto, Ecorse, Michigan, in the last week of October 1932

1 THE LION.



The horse killed it and did not wake him.
A drop and a recovery. Half a beat. It moves eleven pounds off the arch for the length of a bar.

2 THE DESERT.



Three days without water. He followed a ram because a ram must be going somewhere.
Four counts, sideways, the right foot never taking weight. The best of the seven.

3 THE DRAGON.



It came three times and twice he saw nothing.
A fast double turn, on the balls. The only one that hurt. Kept because it woke her up.

4 THE WITCH.



He said a blessing over the wine out of habit and her face came off. A dead stop. One count. The only stillness in the seven, and worth more than the rest together.

5 THE MAN IN THE REEDS.



No step. Not everything has to be a step.

6 THE GIANT.



A thing the size of a hill. A lift of an inch on the second beat, both feet off the floor for half a second.
Four times an hour and no more.

7 THE WHITE DIV.



Its blood cured the king's blindness. Six counts, all the way round, the man as the axis, the weight taken off the right foot three separate times. It looked like the fanciest thing on the floor. It was pure engineering.

Rostam's seven-day road to bring back his blinded king, out of a poem a thousand years old, rebuilt over four nights as seven things a woman could do with her feet when her feet were finished. Run entire for the first time at four in the morning on the thirty-first of October, before nine people in the bleachers. Within a week the Free Press was calling it the Persian dance. Nobody in that building ever knew what any of it was.

SYNOPSIS

On a Saturday night in September 1932, in a dance hall just outside the Detroit city line, ninety-one couples take the floor for a contest with one rule: keep moving. Forty-five minutes of dancing, fifteen minutes on a cot, around the clock, for as long as a body will hold. Last couple standing takes the prize. If one goes down, both are out.

Alma Sutter enters alone and is paired with a stranger — a Persian man the announcer decides to call Barney, because Bahram is more trouble than it's worth. She has buried a daughter six weeks ago. He needs the money and won't say why. Neither of them can afford to be the one who falls.

To keep her awake, he starts telling her a story. It is a thousand years old and it is the only thing he brought with him from home: kings who lose everything, a baby left on a mountain and raised by a bird, a father and a son who meet in single combat without knowing each other's faces. He can't stop moving to tell it, so he teaches it to her as steps.

Outside the hall, a country is coming apart and deciding what to do about it. Inside, two thousand people pay a quarter a night to watch the poor come apart on schedule. Doyle Ferrin, who owns the microphone, knows a good story when he sees one — and he knows something about Alma that she has not told anyone.

Eleven hundred hours is forty-six days. They are going to be on that floor for all of it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The thing that started this book was a number. Between 1920 and 1930, two hundred and eight people came to the United States from Persia. Not two hundred thousand. Two hundred and eight, in ten years.

Think about what that means for one of them. No neighborhood. No restaurant that makes the food you grew up on. Nobody in the state who can say your name, and no one to talk to in your own language, possibly ever again.

Then the Depression comes, a quarter of the country is out of work, and people start counting who belongs. Nobody had to pass a law. When there are ten men for one job, the foreign one goes last. So he takes work nobody else wants — which is how a man ends up shuffling in circles for forty-six days in front of a paying crowd, while an announcer calls him a name that isn't his because the real one is too much bother.

I gave him the only thing he could carry across an ocean for free, which is a story. The Shahnameh is a thousand years old, and it is full of people who don't recognize each other until it's too late. A father fights a stranger, kills him, and finds out afterward it was his son. I've never known whether that's about fate or about something smaller — how easy it is not to say who you are, and how long you can go on not saying it.

I didn't have to make the dance marathons worse than they were. People really danced for six weeks, sleeping fifteen minutes an hour while still moving, held up by a partner. Men died on the floor and the band kept playing. It worked because a country that couldn't stand to look at its own suffering could pay a quarter to watch somebody else's.

Chew Z

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I. FORTY-FIVE AND FIFTEEN

1. THE PHYSICAL

The sign had been up on Jefferson Avenue for eleven days and Alma had walked past it nine times before she went in.

It was painted on a bedsheet and hung off the front of a building that used to sell Studebakers. The showroom windows were soaped over. Somebody had done the lettering in red and then gone back over it in gold, which meant somebody had cared, and the gold had run in the second line so it looked like the words were bleeding upward.

MARATHON DANCE \$1,000 IN CASH THEY GO TILL THEY DROP
25¢

Underneath, smaller, in a hand that had gotten tired: Doyle Ferrin Presents.

She went in at four in the afternoon on a Saturday with sixty cents in her coat and the coat buttoned to the throat because the dress under it had been washed too many times to be seen in daylight.

The showroom had been cleared. They'd taken the cars out and taken the counters out and laid a floor down over the concrete, real maple, and the smell of the varnish was still in the air and made her think, stupidly, of a school. Around three sides they'd built up plank bleachers. Along the fourth was a low stage with a piano on it and a drum kit and six chairs, and above the stage a board the size of a door, blank, with a row of little brass hooks screwed into it.

There was a line of maybe forty people at a card table.

"Name."

The man at the table did not look up. He had a ledger and a fountain pen and a cigarette going in a coffee saucer and he was working fast, the way a man works when he's been told what he'll be paid regardless.

"Alma Sutter."

"Age."

"Twenty-nine."

"Partner."

"I don't have one."

Now he looked up. He had a long face and a small mouth and he was somewhere past forty and his shirt was clean, which in that room was a kind of shouting.

"You come alone."

"Yes."

"Married?"

She said, "My husband's in Toledo," which was true, and let him do the rest of it himself, which he did.

He wrote something. "We got four girls without partners and eleven fellas. You'll get matched. You don't get to pick and you don't get to trade. Once you're paired you're paired till one of you goes down." He turned the ledger around and put the pen on it. "Read that and sign it."

She read the first two lines and then read the rest of it the way you read a thing you have already decided to sign.

The undersigned enters of her own free will and holds harmless Ferrin Amusement Co. of Toledo, Ohio, its agents and employees, against injury, illness, collapse, permanent disability, or death arising from participation.

The undersigned agrees that the decision of the judges is final in all matters.

The undersigned agrees to abide by all rules as posted and as amended at any time and without notice.

The undersigned certifies that all statements given upon entry are true.

She held the pen a second on that last one.

"Dependents," the man said. He'd gone back to writing. "Anybody at home. We put it in the program."

The room went on around her. Somebody on the bleachers laughed at something. A boy was up on a ladder screwing the last of the brass hooks into the board.

"I had a little girl," Alma said.

The pen stopped.

"Had."

"July."

He looked at her then for what felt like a long while and was probably two seconds, and something moved behind the small mouth that she would think about many times later and never be able to name.

"I'm sorry to hear it," he said, and he was — that was the thing, he really was, she'd have sworn to it — and then he wrote it down, and while he was writing he said, in exactly the same voice, "How old."

"Four."

"Name?"

"Ruth."

He wrote that too. Then he blotted it and turned the ledger back around and said, "Doyle Ferrin," and put his hand out, and she shook it, and his hand was dry and warm.

"Doc's in back," he said. "Through there. Then you're in."

— — —

The doctor was a young man with a bad shave who had set up in what used to be the parts department. He listened to her chest with a stethoscope he had to warm in his palm first, and looked in her ears, and asked her to walk to the wall and back, and watched her feet the whole way with more attention than any man had given her in a year.

"Take the shoes off."

She took them off.

He turned her left foot over in his hands like something at a market. "You been on your feet."

"I was at the laundry on Vernor till May."

"Standing?"

"Standing."

He put the foot down. "You got a high arch. That's good for about three hundred hours. After that it isn't." He wrote on his card. "You understand the arch is going to come down."

"Come down."

"Flatten. Permanently. Most of the girls that go long, it happens." He said it the way you'd say it looks like rain. "Once it comes down it doesn't go back up. You'll walk different the rest of your life."

Alma looked at her own feet on the cold floor of a parts department, and thought about the rest of her life, and found that it had gotten very short and very simple and had one thing in it.

"How long is three hundred hours," she said.

"Twelve, thirteen days."

"And the contest runs?"

The doctor laughed once, without any humor in it at all, and wrote something else on the card.

"Lady," he said, "the last one of these I worked ran forty-one days."

— — —

They put her in a green dress from a rack of them. Doyle had bought a lot of forty from a dressmaker in Toledo that went under in the spring, and they were all the same green, and they would be in every photograph anybody ever took of her.

A woman in white pinned the number 63 to her back. She was fifty-some with hands like a bricklayer's and a voice like she'd already told you twice.

"I'm Ida," she said. "I'm the nurse. You'll see more of me than you'll see of God." She worked the second pin through. "You got anything in you now? Anything you take?"

"No."

"You will." Ida turned her around by the shoulders and looked at her, not unkindly, and put a thumb under her jaw and turned her head to the light. "Twenty-nine?"

"Yes."

"Eat everything they put in front of you. Every time. Even when you can't. Especially when you can't." She let go. "And keep your mouth shut about your feet. You go to the doc, he tells Doyle, and Doyle finds a way to make it a thing."

"A thing."

"A story, hon," Ida said. "Everything in here is a story. They pay a quarter for it."

— — —

At half past eight they let the crowd in.

Alma stood at the edge of the maple with the other unmatched women and watched the bleachers fill and could not get her mind around it. It was a Saturday night in the third year of the worst thing that had ever happened to any of them and there were, she would read later in the Free Press, nineteen hundred people in that room. They had all found a quarter. They had all decided that this was what the quarter was for.

A boy of about fifteen went up a ladder at the back of the stage and hung a single brass numeral on the first hook of the board.

0.

The band came out. Six of them, and the piano player was a big soft man in a jacket the color of a plum who sat down without looking at anybody and cracked his knuckles one hand at a time.

Then Doyle Ferrin came out with a microphone on a cord and the room stood up.

He was good. She hadn't expected him to be good. He got them laughing in under a minute and he did it without saying anything funny, just by the rhythm of it, the way he'd lay something down and wait and then pick it up again, and Alma understood that whatever else this was, it was the man's trade, and he was better at his trade than she had ever been at hers.

"Ninety-one couples," Doyle said. "Forty-five minutes on. Fifteen minutes off. Around the clock. Cots come out at midnight and you

can watch 'em sleep, folks, that's included in the price of admission and there's no other show in Michigan where you can say that."

Laughter.

"Rule number one. You keep moving. Rule number two." He let it sit. "If one goes down — both go home."

And the room made a sound Alma had never heard before, a low warm ohhh, nineteen hundred people receiving good news.

They called the unmatched to the middle of the floor.

Four women in green and eleven men in shirtsleeves, standing in the light in front of everybody, while Doyle worked the crowd about it — look at this, folks, look what we got left over — and Alma kept her eyes on the maple and thought about a boy in a photograph she did not have, and about the fact that she had never in her life been looked at by more than about thirty people at once.

"Number sixty-three," Doyle said. "Mrs. Sutter, come out here."

She came out.

"And let's see." He walked the line of men. He was enjoying it. He put his hand on one and moved on, and on the third he stopped and turned around and grinned at the bleachers with the whole of his face.

"Well now," he said. "Folks, we got ourselves a prince."

The man he'd stopped at was maybe thirty. Black hair, a good jaw gone thin, sleeves rolled twice, and he had the stillness of somebody standing in a room he has decided not to be surprised by.

"What's the name, friend?"

The man said it.

Doyle put the microphone closer. "Say again?"

He said it again.

"Bah— " Doyle looked at the crowd and the crowd laughed, and he laughed with them, and it was the friendliest sound in the world. "Folks, I can't get around that one. Where's that from, friend?"

"Persia."

"Persia." Doyle said it the way you'd unwrap something. "Ladies and gentlemen, all the way from Persia. That's your Arabian Nights, that's your flying carpets. That's your sheiks." He put a hand up against the noise. "Now what do we call you, pal, on account of I got to say it four hundred times."

The man looked at Doyle for a moment.

"Bahram," he said.

"Barney," Doyle said.

The bleachers went up like a struck match.

Alma watched the man's face while it happened. There was nothing on it. He waited out the noise, and then he put his hand out toward her, palm up, the way you would offer to help somebody down off a step, and he said, under all of it, so quietly that only she could possibly have heard:

"Not one word from that man is going to be true. It will be easier if you know it now."

She put her hand in his.

At nine o'clock the boy took the numeral off the hook and hung up a 1, and the band started, and ninety-one couples began to move.

2. COT CALL

The first thing she learned was that nobody danced.

She had come in braced for dancing. She had thought about it on the walk over — that she would have to hold a stranger and move to music in front of a crowd, and that this would be the humiliating part — and inside of forty minutes she understood that dancing was not what this was, that dancing was a word Doyle Ferrin used on a bedsheet to get people through a door.

What it was, was walking. Two people holding each other loosely and walking in a slow counterclockwise circle on a maple floor while a band played, and never stopping.

"Don't lift your feet," the man said.

"What?"

"You are lifting your feet." He had a low voice and a careful way of putting a sentence down, like a man setting a full cup on a table. "Slide them. Do not lift them. You will lift them nine thousand times tonight and by tomorrow you will not be able to."

She tried it. It felt ridiculous, a shuffle, an old woman's walk.

"Better."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't. A man told me at the door." He turned them a little to take the corner. "He was very sure."

— — —

At forty-five minutes the air horn went off.

It was mounted over the stage and it was the loudest thing Alma had ever been in a room with. Ninety-one couples came off the floor in a body, through a gap in the bleachers, into the old parts department where they had set up the cots in two long rows, women's side and men's side, with a canvas hung between.

Fifteen minutes.

She lay down in the green dress with her shoes on because a woman on the next cot told her not to take them off — you take 'em off tonight and tomorrow they won't go back on — and she looked at the ceiling and did not sleep at all, and it seemed to her that she had barely got flat before the horn went again.

That was hour one.

— — —

The eighth hour was when she understood the shape of the thing.

Not the pain. There wasn't any pain yet, that was the trick of it, that was why ninety-one couples had signed. It was that the fifteen minutes had stopped being a rest and become a thing that was taken away from her. She would lie down and count the ceiling

boards and the horn would go, and it was as though somebody was standing over her stealing it out of her hands, every hour, forever.

"You are counting," the man said.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You are counting the minutes off. I can feel it in your arm." He steered them past the bandstand. "Don't. Not tonight. Tonight is easy and you are spending yourself on it."

"You've done this."

"No."

"Then how — "

"Because I have done other things." He said it without any weight and she let it go.

— — —

At midnight they brought the cots out onto the floor.

Alma had heard Doyle say it and had not really taken it in, and now here it was: eight iron cots wheeled out under the lights on the maple in front of the bleachers, and Doyle at the microphone explaining, warmly, that folks, these here are your leaders, these are the eight couples the judges like best tonight, and they're going to take their rest right here where you can see 'em.

She and the Persian were not among the eight. That was luck. She watched a girl of maybe twenty from Wyandotte lie down on a cot in the middle of a maple floor and put her forearm over her eyes and go to sleep, actually go to sleep, with nineteen hundred people looking at her and a spotlight on her face, and Alma felt something turn over in her stomach that had nothing to do with tiredness.

"They are the lucky ones," the man said.

"How is that lucky."

"Because they will not have to walk while they sleep." He was quiet a moment. "In two weeks you will want that cot very badly. You will want them to put you in the light so you can lie down. You should

know that about yourself early. It will save you from being surprised."

— — —

He corrected Doyle twice.

The first time was on the second night, at the eleven o'clock, when Doyle came around the floor with the microphone doing what he did — leaning in on a couple, getting a name, getting a story, moving on — and got to them and said, "And here's Barney the Persian Prince, folks, and his lovely partner Alma. Barney, tell the folks about the harem."

The band did a little sting on the cymbal.

And the man said, pleasantly, into the microphone, "There is no harem. I worked eleven years at the Rouge."

It got a laugh. It got a good laugh, actually, and Alma felt him relax half an inch, and Doyle laughed too and said something and moved on.

The second time was four nights later.

Doyle had settled into calling him the Sheik. It had come up out of the crowd, somebody in the bleachers had shouted it, and Doyle had taken it the way he took everything, gratefully, and made it his own inside of an evening. There he goes, folks, the Sheik of Ecorse.

And on the fifth night Bahram stopped, mid-circle, which you were allowed to do so long as you kept your feet going, and he said to Doyle, not into the microphone this time, without heat, the way you would tell a man his shoelace was undone:

"A sheik is an Arab. I am not an Arab. Persia is a different country and a different language and the difference is about as large as the difference between you and a Frenchman."

Doyle looked at him with real interest.

"That so," he said.

"That is so."

"Huh," Doyle said, and nodded slowly, and turned away with the microphone still live and said, "Ladies and gentlemen — the Sheik of Ecorse!"

And nineteen hundred people cheered.

Alma waited until they had gone around twice.

"You could say it again," she said.

"No."

"He might — "

"He knows." The man was looking straight ahead over her shoulder at the far bleachers. "He knew before I said it the first time. He has a map behind that stage with pins in it, he has been in ninety towns, he knows where Persia is. That is what I did not understand until just now." He took the corner. "He is not making a mistake. There is no mistake to correct."

He said it flatly and without any self-pity at all, and then he said:

"So. Barney."

"I won't call you that."

"You will," he said. "Everyone will. It is shorter." And after a moment, in a slightly different voice: "It is a small thing. I have had smaller things cost me more."

— — —

That was the second correction and there was never a third. Alma kept count of that without meaning to, the way you keep count of a dripping tap, and eleven hundred hours later, when she was seventy-one years old and the whole thing had gone as far into the past as her own childhood, the two corrections were still there, sitting in her like two stones in a coat pocket, and she still could not have said why they were the part she couldn't put down.

He answered to Barney by the second week.

By the third week the newspapers had it.

By the fifth week there were nineteen hundred people in Wayne County who believed, without ever having thought about it for one

second, that they had personally met a man named Barney from Arabia, and there was exactly one person in the building who knew what he was actually called, and she was too tired to say it out loud.

3. FORTY-FIVE AND FIFTEEN

Thirty-one couples went in the first two days.

Alma had not expected that either. She had thought it would be a slow thinning, one here and one there, and instead it was a slaughter — boys who'd come in on a dare, a pair of sisters who lasted nine hours, a man of fifty who sat down on the floor at four in the morning of the second day and simply would not get up again, not for the judge, not for his partner, not for anybody, and had to be walked out with his arm over a man's shoulder while the crowd applauded him and Doyle said something kind.

The kind things were the worst. She noticed that early. Doyle never mocked anybody on the way out. He gave them a send-off, he got the crowd to give them a hand, he said let's hear it for a fella that gave us everything he had — and it was so generous, and it made you want so badly to be the one still standing when it was said about somebody else, that Alma understood by the third morning that the kindness was part of the machinery and possibly the most expensive part.

By Tuesday there were sixty couples. By Thursday, fifty-one.

— — —

The days had no shape. That was the thing nobody told you.

Forty-five minutes on and fifteen off, and the fifteen went by like a hand passing over a candle, and so the whole of your life became one continuous hour that kept starting over. There was no morning. There was no evening. There was a moment when the crowd got bigger and a moment when it got smaller, and the crowd was the only clock.

They ate twelve times a day. Standing up, moving, plates held at the chest. Eggs at some hours, and a stew at some hours, and

always coffee, and always bread, and the food was actually not bad — Doyle Ferrin fed them properly and made sure the Free Press knew he fed them properly — and it was the same eleven or twelve things in rotation forever.

“What is this,” Bahram said on the fourth day, looking into the bowl.

“Beef stew.”

“It is not.”

“It’s beef stew, Barney.”

“It is water that has met beef.” He ate it anyway, all of it, quickly. He always ate all of it. “I want you to understand that I am not complaining. I am reporting.”

— — —

They set their arrangement in the first week without ever discussing it, the way people do.

He took the outside of the circle, which was longer, and she took the inside, which was shorter, and he did that without saying so and denied it when she said so.

He talked and she didn’t. He had worked out by the third day that she would go somewhere behind her own eyes if the silence got long enough, and that she came back slower each time, and so he talked — about nothing, about the band, about a foreman he’d had at the Rouge who used to weigh his own lunch on a scale — and she made a sound now and then to show she was there.

And they worked out the sleeping.

That was the strange one. Around the sixtieth hour you stopped being able to keep your eyes open on the floor, and the answer, which every single person in that building arrived at independently and none of them were taught, was that you slept standing up while your partner walked you.

You put your head on their shoulder and you went out. Ten seconds, thirty seconds, sometimes two or three minutes. Your legs kept going. That was the part Alma never got used to and never

stopped thinking about afterward: that her legs kept going. She would come up out of it in a different corner of the room, with the music at a different place in the song, and her feet would have covered forty feet of maple without her.

The judges allowed it. There was a rule that your knees couldn't touch the floor and that was the whole of it. A judge would come along and put two fingers under your chin and lift, to see whether the eyes came open, and if they came open at all you were fine.

"Your turn," he'd say, and she'd put her head down on the wool of his shoulder.

Then, later, "My turn," and he'd put his down on her, and she'd take his weight, and he was heavier than he looked and got lighter every week.

— — —

Ida came around every four hours with the bottle.

It was brown glass with no label and she poured it into a little tin cup and there was a second bottle, a smaller one, that came out only at night.

"What is it," Alma asked the first time.

"That one'll keep you up." Ida held out the cup. "The other one'll put you down. You want the down one at cot call, not now."

"But what is it?"

"Hon," Ida said, "it's four dollars a week and I don't ask."

It tasted like licorice and something underneath the licorice that was not licorice. It went down warm. Twenty minutes later Alma noticed that the cymbals had gotten louder, which she assumed meant the drummer had gotten louder, and it was three weeks before she understood that the drummer had had nothing to do with it.

Bahram took his and did not comment.

"You've had that before," she said.

"Something like it."

"Where?"

He was quiet for a bit. Then: "There is a foundry job at the Rouge where you stand in front of an open door. The men who did that job were given something in their coffee in the summer of 1929, from a nurse, in a cup, and nobody asked what it was, and it tasted of licorice." He shrugged with the shoulder she wasn't using. "It is the same country. It is only a different room."

— — —

The first hard night was hour seventy-something.

She stopped being able to feel her right foot from the arch forward. Not numb exactly — it had gone strange, it had become an object she was operating, a thing at the end of her leg that reported back late.

She started to go down at the far corner by the fire door, and she knew she was going, and there was a long strange moment in which she watched herself go and had no opinion about it at all.

He caught her under both arms and got a knee behind her knee and walked her, and it took maybe eight seconds, and no judge saw it.

When she came back up he was talking. He had not stopped talking.

" — and the pier at Bandar, which is not a pier, it is four boards, and I stood on it with a bag and I was twenty-two years old and I had never in my life been out of sight of the mountain — "

"Barney."

" — so you can imagine — "

"Barney. I'm here."

"I know," he said. "I was talking so that you would have somewhere to come back to."

The band went into something slow. Fitz had a way of doing that when the floor started to look bad, dropping the tempo without being asked, and Doyle let him, because Doyle knew the difference

between the show he was selling tonight and the show he was selling in five weeks.

Alma got her foot back around hour seventy-eight.

"Thank you," she said.

"It is not a favor," Bahram said. "If you go down, I go with you. You understand that this is the only reason anyone in this room is kind to anyone."

"Is that true?"

He thought about it honestly. She would learn that he always thought about things honestly, that he was incapable of the small automatic lie that oiled every other conversation she'd ever had, and that this was going to be either the best or the worst thing about him.

"No," he said at last. "But it is true enough to say out loud."

4. AFTER YOU

They lost ninety seconds a night to good manners and it took her nine days to find out why.

It happened at the horn. The horn would go and the couples would come off the maple and there was a bottleneck at the gap in the bleachers, one door's width for a hundred people, and everybody in that building shoved except the two of them.

The first night she'd thought it was chivalry. He stood back at the gap and put a hand out — please — and she went through, and that was that, and it cost them maybe four seconds.

By the second week the bottleneck had gotten worse, because the couples that were left were slower, and the four seconds had become fifteen, and Alma had started saying no, you go, your feet are worse than mine, and he had started saying my feet are excellent, please, and they would stand in the gap while forty people went around them, having a small polite argument, losing rest they could not get back.

"This is insane," she said, on the ninth day, lying down with eleven minutes left of fifteen.

"Yes."

"Then go first."

"After you."

"Barney."

"That is not something I can do," he said, from the men's side of the canvas, in the dark. "I am aware of how it sounds."

"Why not?"

There was a long pause and she thought he'd gone to sleep, which was the correct use of the time.

"There is a thing we do," he said. "It does not have a word in English. You offer, and the other person refuses, and you offer again, and they refuse again, and you offer a third time, and then they accept. Three times. If they accept the first time, they are a peasant. If you only offer once, you are a liar." She heard him turn over. "You cannot buy a melon in Tabriz in under four minutes."

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard."

"It is."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because I am thirty years old," he said, "and it is in my hands."

— — —

She started timing it after that, for something to do.

Hour 214: eleven seconds. Hour 215: nine. Hour 216: twenty-two, because Ida had got in behind them and joined in, saying oh, go on, go on, and made it a three-body problem.

"You know what this is costing us," Alma said.

"Ninety seconds a night."

"You knew?"

"I have known since the fourth night. I have been doing the arithmetic for a week." He steered her past the stage. "Ninety seconds a night, forty-six nights. It is one hour and nine minutes of sleep."

"You could just walk through the door."

"Yes."

"Then — "

"You could accept the first offer," he said.

She opened her mouth and shut it again.

"There it is," he said. "You cannot either. Because in your country if a woman goes through a door in front of a man who has held it, she is — what is the word. Fast."

"That's not — " She stopped. "That's not the same."

"No. It is exactly the same and it is a different word." He was smiling; she could hear it without looking. "The difference is that yours is invisible to you. Mine is a costume. Everyone can see mine."

— — —

The cultural instruction went both ways and neither of them was any good at it.

He could not understand how are you. He had been in the country eight years and it still stopped him.

"A man at the meal counter asked me how I was."

"He was being friendly."

"I told him." Bahram sounded genuinely aggrieved. "I told him that my back was bad and that I had not seen my mother's grave and that I did not think I would win this contest. And he looked at me as if I had put my hand in his pocket."

"You're supposed to say fine."

"Even if I am not fine."

"Especially if you're not fine."

"So it is not a question."

"It's not a question."

"Then why," he said, with real feeling, "is it shaped like one."

— — —

She, for her part, spent most of the first two weeks under the impression that Persia was somewhere near Egypt, that he had grown up around camels, and that Persian was a kind of cat and also a kind of rug and had nothing to do with a country.

"There is a rug," he conceded. "There are many rugs. My uncle sold rugs. I am not going to pretend the rugs are a slander."

"And the cat?"

"The cat is a Turkish cat," he said, "and it is a long story and it makes me angry."

She laughed. It surprised them both. It was hour two hundred and something and it was the first time she had laughed since June, and the sound came out of her wrong, cracked in the middle, and she put her face down on his shoulder so nobody in the bleachers would see it happen.

He walked her in a slow circle and did not say anything about it.

That was the other thing about him, and it took her longer to notice than the manners: he let things be. Every other person she had met since July had wanted her to do something with her face. Look up, chin up, there's a girl, smile now. He just walked.

— — —

There was one more piece of the arrangement and it got settled that same week, at the gap in the bleachers, at hour two hundred and thirty, when a boy from Wyandotte tried to push past them and Bahram put a forearm out and stopped him without appearing to move at all.

"After you," Bahram said to Alma.

"After you."

"After you."

"After you."

And Ida, coming up behind with the bottles, said, "Oh for the love of Christ," and put a hand flat on each of their backs and shoved them both through the door at once, sideways, jammed in the frame together, and the whole women's side of the parts department laughed at them, and it was the best thing that happened in the first thousand hours.

After that, they went through together. It cost four seconds.

They still did the argument. They just did it moving.

5. THE FIRST ONE DOWN

The song came out of nothing on a Wednesday.

Doyle had written it himself. He admitted that freely, at the microphone, the way he admitted everything — folks, I wrote this on a train outside Sandusky and I want you to know it took me nine minutes — and Fitz had put a tune under it, a slow one in a walking tempo, and the deal was that the band played it every time a couple went out.

It went:

*The bank took the farm and the farm took the man,
I got two left shoes and a coffee can,
But the sign said DANCE and I said I can —
So hold me up till the horn.*

The first time she heard it, a boy and a girl from Lincoln Park were being walked off with their arms around a judge, and the crowd was singing along by the second line, because Doyle had taught it to them the night before on purpose.

By the fourth week Alma could not get it out of her head at any hour of the day. It got in under everything. It was in her feet.

— — —

They lost couple number thirty-one on the same night and Doyle added a verse.

That was the arrangement, and he announced it as though it were a tribute. Every couple that goes out, folks, they get a verse. That's

their verse. It belongs to them now. And the couple going out would be crying with exhaustion and gratitude at the door, and the band would play the new verse, and nineteen hundred people would learn it, and it would be theirs forever.

*Fifteen minutes is a mighty short night,
Forty-five is a mighty long fight,
And the fella keeps score by the ceiling light —
So hold me up till the horn.*

"He is very good at this," Bahram said.

"He's terrible."

"He is both." He turned them at the corner. "Do you know what the song does?"

"It's a song."

"It teaches them that going out is beautiful," he said. "It is the most useful thing in this building. In two weeks, when you are finished, you will not want to stop. You will want your verse."

— — —

She stopped talking on the eighty-eighth hour and did not start again for most of a day.

There was no reason. Nothing had happened. She had gotten through the door for the fifteen and lain down on the cot and looked at the ceiling and something in her had simply put its tools down.

She got up at the horn and walked and did not answer him.

He tried three things. He tried a question, and she didn't answer it. He tried a joke about the stew. He tried silence, and after about half an hour of silence he did something she felt in her spine: he took his hand off her back for a second and put it down again lower and tighter, the way you'd take hold of something on a slope.

"I am going to talk now," he said, "and you do not have to say anything at all. But I want you to listen, because if you go where you are going I will not be able to reach you and then we will both be walking out that door tonight."

She said nothing.

"There was a man," he said, "and he was the first man."

The band was playing something with brushes on the snare.

"He lived in the mountains and he wore the skins of animals because nobody had made cloth yet. Nobody had made anything yet. He was the first, so everything that existed, he was the one who had to think of it. Fire. Cooking a thing before you eat it. He had a son, and he loved his son the way you love a thing when there is only one of it in the world, and something came out of the dark and killed the boy."

Alma kept walking.

"And that is the first story," Bahram said. "Not the making of the world. The world was already there. The first story is a father who has to go on being the first man after his son is dead, because there is nobody else to be it."

They went around the corner by the fire door.

"What happened to him," she said.

It came out of her like a splinter coming out.

"He wept for a year," Bahram said, "and then he went to war, and he won, and it did not help. It is very old. Nobody had thought yet to say that it helped."

— — —

She asked him where it came from and he said it was from a book, and she said what book, and he said the book, and she said what, and he looked at her with an expression she would learn to recognize as a man deciding whether to be insulted.

"It is a poem," he said. "It is called the Shahnameh. That means the Book of Kings, and that is exactly what is in it — kings, in order, from the first one to the last." He turned them at the corner. "It is sixty thousand lines. Everyone where I am from knows some of it and nobody has read all of it. It took one man thirty years to write."

"Like the Arabian Nights."

There was a pause of a length that she felt in her teeth.

"No," Bahram said.

"Well, it — "

"No. The Arabian Nights is a woman telling a king stories so that he will not cut her head off in the morning. It is a wonderful book. It is Arab and Indian and Persian and it is about stories." He was walking faster; she had to adjust. "This is not that. This is what happened. Or — " and he pulled himself back, visibly, "— it is what we say happened. Kings and years and the names of their sons. It is the history of the world up until the part where the history gets written down by clerks and becomes boring."

"You're angry."

"I am not angry."

"Barney."

"I am a little angry," he said, "and I would like to state that it is not with you, it is with a man in Ohio in 1926 who told me that where I come from is a place where people ride carpets."

— — —

They went out onto the floor at the horn and Doyle was already going, working the crowd for the eleven o'clock, and the band came in behind him.

*They give you a cot and they give you a spot,
They give you a number, they give you a lot,
They give you everything, mister, but what you ain't got —
So hold me up till the horn.*

Somewhere behind the bleachers a couple was crying and being congratulated.

"Tell me the next one," Alma said.

"Not tonight."

"Why not."

"Because you have started listening," Bahram said, "and that is worth more than a story. I am going to make it last."

6. TABRIZ

There were forty-four couples left when the Free Press sent a man out.

He came on a Sunday afternoon with a photographer and stayed two hours, and Doyle walked him around the floor like a tenant showing an apartment. The photograph they ran on the Monday was of the Wyandotte girl asleep on a cot under a spotlight, and it was a good photograph, and it sold a great many quarter admissions, and the caption did not have her name in it.

The story called Bahram a Persian, known to the crowd as Barney.

He read it twice and folded it and gave it back to her and said nothing about it at all, which was how she learned to tell when something had gone into him.

— — —

He told her about the mountain that night, in the small hours, when the bleachers were down to about sixty people and the band was three men.

"Tabriz is in the north," he said. "It is high. There is a mountain called Sahand and it is on your left when you go out of the city to the south and it is the first thing I ever saw and the last thing. Everything in my life until I was twenty-two happened where I could see that mountain."

"What was your house like?"

"Small. Flat roof. In the summer we slept on the roof." He walked her past the stage. "You cannot imagine it and I am not going to try to make you. It was a house."

"Did you have brothers?"

"No."

"Sisters?"

"No." He took a breath. "There was one of me, and there was my mother, and there was a very great deal of quiet."

She waited.

"My father left in the winter of 1911," he said. "I was nine."

— — —

He told it plainly, in the order it happened, without decorating it, and she understood by the fourth sentence that he had told it before and probably to himself.

There had been Americans in Persia. That was the part she couldn't get her mind around. In 1911 the government in Tehran had been broke and badly governed and half-eaten by the Russians and the British, and somebody had had the idea of hiring an American to come and run the treasury — an actual American, from Washington — and he had come, with a staff, and Bahram's father had been one of the Persian men who worked for them.

"He was a clerk. He wrote numbers in a book. He was very proud of it, that he worked for the Americans, and I remember that he began to wear a different collar."

"What happened?"

"The Russians did not like it. They put soldiers on the road to Tehran and they gave the government two days to send the Americans home, and the government sent them home." He was quiet a moment. "That is the whole of it. Two days. A country decides something in two days and forty years happen to you because of it."

"And your father went with them."

"My father went with them." He turned them at the corner. "He said he would send for us. He said six months. He was not lying — I want to be accurate about this, because it took me twenty years to be accurate about it. He was not lying when he said it. He meant it in the room, out loud, with his hand on my head."

The band went into the song for a couple going out, somewhere behind them, and the crowd sang.

"He wrote for two years," Bahram said. "Then he wrote less. Then there was a war and everybody stopped writing. My mother kept the letters in a tin that had been a tin of English biscuits and she

read them in an order that she had worked out and she never told me what the order was."

"When did she die?"

"1919. There was famine in the north. It was not one thing that killed her, it was the whole of that year." He said it evenly. "I was seventeen. I sold the house and I kept the tin."

— — —

"So you came here to find him."

"No," Bahram said, too fast, and then, "yes. Of course. Yes."

They went around.

"I told myself it was work," he said. "I told the man at the consulate it was work. I told myself for four years on the way — because it took four years, I did not get on a ship and arrive, I went to Baku and I went to Constantinople and I was in Constantinople for nineteen months painting numbers on buses — and every single day of it I told myself I was going to America because America is where the work is."

"And?"

"And that was also true," he said. "That is the thing that nobody explains to you about a lie you tell yourself. It is not that it is false. It is that it is true and it is not the reason."

Alma put her head down on his shoulder for a while.

When she came up he was still walking, and the room had gone that particular green-brown color it went at four in the morning, and he said, as though there had been no gap:

"I chose my name on the boat."

"You what?"

"My mother called me Abbas. It is a fine name. Half the men in the city are called it." He shrugged. "On the boat there was a man from Rasht with a book, and I read it for eleven days, and there is a king in it called Bahram who was a hunter, and when I came to the desk in New York and the man said name, I said Bahram."

"You can't just — "

"You can. That is what America turns out to be." He almost smiled.

"You can do it once, at a desk, in eight seconds, and then it is done and there is nobody alive who can tell them otherwise."

She thought about the ledger at the card table and a fountain pen and a line that said the undersigned certifies that all statements given upon entry are true, and she felt something go cold along her arms.

"Did you find him?" she said.

Bahram walked four or five steps.

"That," he said, "is a different story and I am saving it."

— — —

At six in the morning the horn went and they came off, and in the parts department Ida was going down the row with the small bottle, the night one, the one that put you down, and when she got to Alma she stopped.

"You been crying."

"No."

"Hon," Ida said, "I been doing this eleven years and I can tell in the dark." She poured out the little tin cup. "Drink that. And listen to me. Whatever he's telling you out there — "

"He's telling me stories."

"I know what he's doing," Ida said. "I seen it before. It works." She capped the bottle. "You just remember there's a fella with a microphone forty feet from here whose whole business is finding out what a person's got and selling it back to 'em, and the only two people in this building he don't know a thing about is you and the Sheik."

Alma drank the cup.

"And Ida," she said, "the two of us — how long do you give us?"

Ida looked at her a moment.

"Hon," she said, "I don't give anybody anything. Lie down."

7. THE STORY SHE TELLS

She told him on the ninth night and it was the only time in eleven hundred hours that she started a conversation.

They were down to forty couples. The band was five men now — the second trumpet had gone back to Toledo — and Fitz was playing something with a lot of space in it, and the bleachers were maybe a third full because it was a Monday and it was raining.

"I want to tell you something," Alma said, "and then I don't want to talk about it again."

"All right."

"I mean it. Not once."

"Then you should not tell me," Bahram said. "Because if you tell me I will want to talk about it, and I will have to spend the next month not doing it, and I am already carrying as much as I can carry."

"I have to tell somebody."

He walked her four or five steps.

"Then tell me," he said. "And I will not bring it up. That is a real promise and you may hold me to it."

— — —

"I'm from Kentucky," she said. "Harlan County. My daddy was in the mines and his daddy was in the mines and I got out at twenty-five, which where I'm from is not getting out, that's running off."

"Why did you run off?"

"Roy." She said the name and it did nothing to her, which was interesting. "Roy Sutter. He came through with a road crew in '27 and he had a way of standing that I liked and we were married in April and in Detroit by August, because they were paying five dollars a day at Ford's and everybody in Harlan County had heard about it, and half of them came."

"They were paying five dollars a day in 1927."

"They were."

"They were paying four in 1931," Bahram said, "and then they were paying nobody. I was there for both ends of it."

"We might have passed each other."

"We did not," he said. "The Rouge is the size of your county. I worked at a door for five years and I could not tell you what was behind the next building."

— — —

"Ruth came in May of '28," Alma said.

That was the first time she'd said the name out loud since the summer and she had to walk a while before the next part.

"She was — " and she found she had nothing. All the words for it were the same six words everybody used and none of them were the thing. "She had a way of holding a cup with both hands like it was heavy. Even when it wasn't. Even at four. I don't know where she got it."

"Go on."

"Roy was laid off in the spring of '31 and then he got on again in the fall for eleven weeks and then that was it. And you know how that goes, you were there. He went out every morning for about a year." She could hear the rain on the roof over the music. "He went to Toledo in February. He said there was something at Willys. He wrote once in March. There's no letters after March."

"You do not know if he is alive."

"I don't know if he's alive." She said it flatly. "And I'll tell you the ugly part, which is that by June I'd stopped hoping he was, because if he was alive it meant he'd chosen, and I could carry the other thing better."

Bahram made a small sound of understanding that had no words in it and she was grateful for it for the rest of her life.

— — —

"I was at the laundry on Vernor till May," she said. "Then they cut to two girls. And then it was just — "

She stopped.

"You do not have to."

"I'm going to." She got her breath. "It was July. It was the eleventh of July, it was a Monday, and I carried her there myself. I want you to know that. Whatever else, I carried her there myself and I didn't let anybody else do it."

"Where?"

"Out past Northville," Alma said. "It's a long way. I had a nickel for the streetcar as far as it goes and then it's a walk. It was ninety-some degrees. She had on the blue dress with the smocking, because that was the good one, and I did her hair, and I remember thinking it was a stupid thing to be doing, doing a child's hair on a day like that, and I did it anyway and I took my time over it."

She heard her own voice going and let it go.

"There was a woman there. She was kind about it. They were all kind about it, that's — that's a thing nobody tells you, that everybody's kind and it doesn't touch it at all. And there was a form to sign, because there's always a form."

"Yes."

"And then I couldn't stay." Alma's hands had closed on the back of his shirt. "That's the part. I want to say it out loud one time. I couldn't stay. I got up and I walked out of that building and down that road and I did not look back at it, not once, not one time, because I knew if I looked back I wasn't going to be able to do it, and so I have never seen — "

She stopped.

Bahram walked her around the corner by the fire door and past the bandstand and around again, and did not say anything, and did not ask her to finish the sentence.

"So that's July," she said, when she could. "And that's why I'm in a dance hall in Ecorse, Michigan."

— — —

He waited a long time before he spoke, long enough that the band changed songs.

"What is the money for?"

"What?"

"The thousand dollars." He said it gently. "Everyone in this building has a number. Chick and Dot want a boarding house, they told me on the second night. The boy from Wyandotte wants a truck. What is yours?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters more than anything else about you," Bahram said. "It is the only thing in here that is real. Everything else is what we tell each other at four in the morning."

The rain got harder on the roof.

"A stone," Alma said.

"A stone."

"A headstone." She looked at the maple going by under them. "They're eleven dollars for the small kind, with a name on it. And a date. I priced it."

"Eleven dollars."

"Eleven dollars."

"And the prize is one thousand."

"Yes."

He did not say the obvious thing. She had braced for it all through the sentence — then why are you here, Alma, for eleven dollars, for a piece of rock — and he did not say it, and she looked up at him and his jaw was set and he was staring at the far bleachers.

"All right," he said.

"That's it? All right?"

"You said you did not want to talk about it again." Bahram took the corner. "So. All right."

— — —

He kept that promise.

He never brought it up. Not in the sixth week when she was hallucinating and would have told him anything. Not at the end. Not once in eleven hundred hours did he ask her a single question about the eleventh of July, and at the time she thought it was the finest thing anybody had ever done for her.

Thirty-nine years later, in a room in Dearborn with a photograph on the wall, she would still be trying to work out whether it had been.

II. THE HORSES

8. HEEL AND TOE

The gate fell off in the second week and Doyle went to work.

Alma could read it in the bleachers before she could read it anywhere else. The first Saturday there had been nineteen hundred people. The second Saturday there were maybe eleven hundred, and on the Tuesday after that she counted three hundred and stopped counting.

The reason was simple and Doyle explained it to them himself, standing on the edge of the maple with the microphone down at his side, off, talking to the dancers like a foreman.

"You're too good," he said. "That's the problem. Forty couples and every one of you looks like you could go another month. Nobody pays a quarter to watch forty healthy people take a walk." He looked down the line. "So we're going to start doing derbies. That's a race. You'll hate it. It's how this works and I'd rather tell you than let you find out."

— — —

The first one was a heel-and-toe.

The rule was that the toe of the back foot had to touch the heel of the front foot on every step, no gap, no running, and you went in a circle around the outside of the floor for one hour, and the last two couples to make each lap dropped out of the race and the rest kept going, and the couple standing at the end got twenty dollars in cash.

Twenty dollars. Doyle held it up in the air, four fives, and the room came alive for the first time in eight days.

"You do not have to win," Bahram said, while they were lining up.

"Twenty dollars."

"You do not have to win," he said again. "Listen to me. There are forty couples. Doyle needs a spectacle and a spectacle needs somebody to break in front of everybody. If you decide to win this you will be that person, and you will be that person in front of a photographer, and then he will own you." He shifted his grip on her

hand. "We finish in the middle. Every time. That is the whole plan and it is the plan for six weeks."

"Twenty dollars is — "

"Twenty dollars is two weeks of your life," Bahram said. "Do the sum properly."

She did the sum properly. She hated it.

They finished eleventh out of forty and Chick and Dot Mullaly won, and the crowd went home happy, and it cost her the skin on both heels.

— — —

The derbies came every day after that and they were all different and they were all the same. Figure-eights, twenty-five laps. Elimination sprints for the men while the women stood at the rail and watched. Something Doyle called a dynamite sprint, which was three minutes of actual fast dancing and was worse than an hour of anything else.

And they ruined the storytelling.

That was what Alma noticed first, and she was ashamed of noticing it. Not her feet. Not the twelve pounds she'd lost. The fact that from the tenth day onward, the hours that had been for talking got eaten, because a derby left you unable to put a sentence together for two hours afterward, and by then it was cot call.

"We are losing it," she said, on the eleventh night.

"I know."

"You said you'd make it last. There isn't going to be — "

"I know, Alma." He rubbed at his eyes with the back of his wrist. "I have been thinking about it for four days."

— — —

The answer came at hour two hundred and seventy and it came from Doyle, who did not know he had given it.

They were in the middle of a heel-and-toe, ninth lap, and Doyle was calling it over the microphone — look at the Sheik, folks, look at the footwork on that fella — and there was nothing at all to look at, Bahram was doing the same shuffle as everybody else, but Doyle said it and the crowd looked, and something went across Bahram's face that Alma had not seen before.

That night he stopped in the middle of the floor.

"Give me your hands."

"What?"

"Both hands. Face me." He took them. They were still moving — you had to be — but he had turned her so they were square on, chest to chest, hands joined, sliding sideways. "Now. There was a king."

"Barney, I can't — I'm not going to remember a — "

"You are not going to remember it," he said. "You are going to learn it. There is a difference and your legs know it and your head does not." He pushed her left hand out and up, and she went with it, and they turned. "There was a king. He had everything. He had ruled for three hundred years and he had made — "

He turned her under his arm, badly, and she stumbled, and he caught her.

"Again. He had made everything. Cloth. Medicine. Ships. Bricks. Every good thing in the world, he had thought of it." He turned her again and this time she came around clean. "And after three hundred years he stood up in front of everybody and said: all of this is mine. I made it. There is nobody above me."

"What happened to him?"

"That turn," Bahram said, "is what happened to him."

She did it again. Out, under, around. The light went across her face and away.

"That is the whole story," he said. "That turn. When you do that turn you are Jamshid, and you are saying I did this myself, and everything he had came off him like a coat. His men left. His

country left. He ran for a hundred years and they caught him in the end." He stopped her. "Now. Show me."

Alma did the turn.

"Again."

She did it again.

"That is Jamshid," Bahram said. "You have him now. You will have him in forty years. I could take the whole poem out of your head with a hammer and your arm would still know that."

— — —

It became the method and it saved the book of it.

He blocked it out in pieces small enough to survive a derby. A step, a turn, a lift of the elbow, a way of setting the shoulders — and each one was a piece of the story, and he'd give her one in the good hours and then, in the ruined hours after a sprint when neither of them could speak, he would just do it, put her through the figure, and she'd come out the other side with the story sitting in her without a word having been said.

"It is not mine," he said, when she told him it was clever. "This is how it was always done. Nobody read that poem for eight hundred years. There was a man in a coffee house with a stick and he acted it out. He did the voices. He did the fighting. That is what it is for."

"So I'm the coffee house."

"You are the coffee house," Bahram agreed. "It is not a large coffee house and it has one customer and the customer is on the floor of an automobile showroom in Michigan." He turned her under his arm. "But it is running. Which is more than can be said for the one my uncle had."

— — —

Doyle noticed within four days.

He noticed because it was his job to notice and because a man with a microphone spends nine hours a day looking for the one thing in a room that is different. He started drifting past them. He started

putting the crowd's eye on them — and here's the Sheik and Alma, folks, doing something fancy over here.

And Alma, who was twenty-nine years old and had not been looked at with approval by anybody in a year and a half, felt herself lift, and stood up straighter, and let it feel good.

"Don't," Bahram said.

"Don't what?"

"That." He was looking at the far bleachers. "He has found the thing about us. He will use it. From now on you should assume that anything he likes about us is a thing that is going to be taken."

"You're not a very cheerful man, Barney."

"No," he said, and turned her under his arm, and the crowd made a small pleased noise, and somewhere behind them Doyle Ferrin filed it away.

9. THE BLACKSMITH'S APRON

There was a man in the third row on the north side who came four nights a week and never brought anybody with him.

Alma noticed him around the twelfth day because he was the only person in the building who did not eat. Everybody in those bleachers ate — peanuts, sandwiches out of paper, Doyle sold hot dogs at intermission for a nickel — and this man sat with his hands on his knees and watched the floor and left when the lights came up.

He was maybe fifty. He wore a jacket that had been a good jacket. There was something wrong with his left hand; he kept it curled.

"That one has been here since the first week," Bahram said.

"You've been watching him?"

"I have been watching everybody. There is nothing else to look at." He turned them at the corner. "That man was at the Rouge."

"How can you possibly — "

"Because of the hand," Bahram said, "and because of the way he does not spend money."

— — —

The story came on the thirteenth night and it came because of the man in the third row.

They were doing the slow circle at half past one in the morning and Bahram said, without any lead-up:

"After Jamshid there was a king who had a snake on each shoulder."

Alma laughed. She was too tired for it to come out as a laugh; it came out as a cough.

"You are going to have to do better than that."

"I am not going to do better than that. That is the story." He took her hands and squared her up. "His name was Zahhak. A devil kissed him on both shoulders and two black snakes grew out of the places, and they could not be cut off — cut one and two grow — and they had to be fed."

"Fed what."

"Brains," Bahram said. "Two men a day. Every day. For a thousand years."

She stopped laughing.

"That is the number in the poem. A thousand years. And it works, that is the horrible part, it is not a wicked king who is overthrown in a fortnight, he rules. He builds. There are roads. There are officials with ledgers." He was walking her in the long slow circle now, keeping her square. "There is a man in every town whose job it is to bring the two names. And the country gets used to it. That is what the poem is actually about. Not the snakes. The getting used to it."

Alma looked out at the bleachers, at the sixty or seventy people in them at half past one in the morning, and at the man in the third row on the north side with his hands on his knees.

"How does it end?"

"A blacksmith," Bahram said.

— — —

"His name was Kaveh and he was nobody. He was not a prince, he had no army, he was a man who made nails. And he had eighteen sons and the snake king took seventeen of them, one at a time, over the years, and Kaveh said nothing, because what does a man who makes nails say."

He turned her under his arm.

"And then they came for the eighteenth."

The band was three men and the piano.

"So Kaveh went to the palace. And there is a thing they made him do — the king had a paper, and all the great men of the country had signed it, and it said that the king was a just king and that everyone was content." Bahram's voice had not changed at all and that was somehow the worst of it. "They put the paper in front of Kaveh and told him to sign, because they wanted a workingman on it. And he read it. And he tore it up in front of the whole court."

"They killed him."

"They gave him his son," Bahram said. "That is what happened. He tore up the paper and shouted at the king and they were so astonished that they gave him the boy and let them both walk out."

"That's not — "

"It is not the end. He walked out into the street with his son and he took off the leather apron he wore at the forge — the thing he wore to keep the sparks off, it was filthy, it was a rag — and he put it up on a spear."

Alma had stopped moving her feet properly and he corrected her with his knee.

"And that was the flag," Bahram said. "That was the flag of the country for a thousand years afterward. Kings put jewels on it. It was carried into every battle in the poem. And it was a blacksmith's

dirty apron and everyone knew it was a blacksmith's dirty apron and that was the entire point of it."

— — —

He said the last of it a little louder than he needed to.

Not much. Not so that anybody would have called it shouting. But the man in the third row on the north side had turned his head, and was watching them, and Alma understood with a small cold shock that Bahram had known he was there and had been telling it to him.

They went around twice more.

"March," the man said.

His voice carried. There were sixty people in that room and no crowd noise to swallow it.

Bahram stopped them.

"March," the man said again. "The seventh of March. Were you there."

"No," Bahram said. "I had been laid off fourteen months. I read it in the paper like everybody else."

"I was there." The man turned the curled hand over in his lap and looked at it. "Three thousand of us walked out to the Dearborn line to ask them for work. That's all it was. Ask. And they had the fire hoses on us at the bridge and it was twenty degrees, and then they started shooting, and they killed four boys, and the oldest one of 'em was twenty-five."

Nobody in the bleachers moved.

"They shot 'em in the back," the man said. "And I've been out of work since the twenty-ninth of April and I come here four nights a week because I can't stand to be in the house."

Alma did not know what to do with her face.

Bahram let a moment go by. Then he said, evenly, across forty feet of empty maple:

"Then you already know the story. I have only been telling you the old version."

The man looked at him for a long time.

"Fella," he said, "what's your actual name?"

And Bahram told him.

The man tried it. He got it wrong the first time and Bahram corrected him and he got it on the second, roughly, badly, but he got it — the first American mouth to hold it in eight years — and he nodded once and sat back and put his hands on his knees.

He was there on the Thursday and the Friday. On the Saturday he wasn't, and he never came again, and Alma looked for him at the end and he was not in the room.

— — —

Doyle had been standing at the edge of the bandstand for the last of it with the microphone off.

He came over at the horn.

"That was good," he said.

Neither of them answered.

"No, I mean it. That was good." He was not being sarcastic. That was the thing about him she could never get past — he was never sarcastic. "The snakes and the fella with the apron. Where's that from?"

"It is a poem."

"Huh." Doyle nodded, thinking. "Could you do that up there?" He pointed at the microphone stand with his chin. "In front of the house. On a Saturday."

"No."

"Twenty dollars."

"No," Bahram said.

Doyle grinned at him with the whole of his face, entirely without malice, the way a man grins at a fish that has just gone off the hook and is still in the water and is not going anywhere.

"Okay," he said. "Sure. Not tonight."

10. TWELVE MEALS A DAY

The food came on tin trays through a hatch in the wall of the old parts department and it came twelve times in every twenty-four hours and it never stopped and by the third week it had become the most important thing in Alma's life.

Not because she was hungry. She had stopped being hungry around the two hundredth hour, which the doctor said was normal and which she did not believe. It was that the meals were the only thing that changed. The dancing did not change. The horn did not change. But at some hours there were eggs and at some hours there was the stew, and so the eggs and the stew became weather, and she found herself, at twenty-nine years old, in the fourth year of a national catastrophe, on a maple floor, lying in wait for scrambled eggs.

Bahram had a running quarrel with all of it.

"I want to say something about the bread."

"Say it."

"It is not bread." He was holding a slice of it in the hand that wasn't on her back, eating it in the small fast bites that were the only way to eat while moving. "It is a kind of white pillow. It has no argument in it."

"It's bread, Barney."

"Bread has a crust that fights you," he said. "That is the purpose of a crust. This surrenders." He ate the rest of it. "I would like to be clear that I am going to eat every piece of it that this man gives me."

"I know."

"I am reporting. I am not complaining."

"You keep saying that."

"Because there is a difference," Bahram said, "and I am the only person in this building who observes it."

— — —

The list of grievances grew and she began to keep it, mentally, for entertainment, the way you'd keep a bird list.

The coffee, which he said was brown water pretending to a career. The pie, which he had opinions about that took eleven minutes to deliver. Cheese — he had a whole thing about American cheese that started reasonably and ended with him saying that a nation that would do that to milk would do it to anything, and Alma had to put her forehead on his shoulder because she was laughing and couldn't be seen to.

And the tea.

The tea was the real one. She learned not to bring it up.

"They put it in a bag."

"Barney."

"They put the leaves in a little cloth bag," Bahram said, "and they hang it in the water like a drowned mouse, and then they take it out and throw it away, and then — then — they put milk in it."

"Everybody puts milk in it."

"My mother would have shut the door of the house."

— — —

Chick Mullaly took a liking to him, which was not something either of them had planned.

Chick and Dot were the professionals — they'd done four contests that year, Wheeling and Louisville and two in Ohio, and they arrived at the Rialto with their own shoes and their own foot powder and a way of moving that made everything Alma did look like an accident. Dot could sleep on her feet for eleven minutes at a stretch. Chick had a face like a closed shop.

But he liked Bahram, and it was because of the complaining.

"Do the cheese one," he'd say, coming past on the outside.

"I am not a vaudeville."

"Do the cheese one for Dot. She ain't heard it."

And Bahram would sigh in a way that took about four seconds and then do the cheese one, and Dot would laugh in her sleep-walking half-conscious way, and the four of them would go around the floor in a loose group at three in the morning like the last people at a party.

It was Chick who explained the trays.

"You know why it's twelve, right?"

"Because they are generous," Bahram said.

"Because you can't quit on a full stomach." Chick said it without any particular feeling. "Fella gets hungry, he starts thinking about his mother's kitchen, and then he's out the door in an hour. Ferrin knows that. Every promoter knows that. It's the cheapest thing they do." He shrugged. "Best food I've had in two years, and I've had it in nine states, and every plate of it's a nail."

— — —

Alma's own education went the other way and she was, she would admit later, a slower student.

She had thought Persia was near Egypt. She said so out loud on the fourteenth day and there was a silence of a quality she had not previously experienced.

"Egypt," Bahram said.

"I don't know! It's — it's all — "

"Finish the sentence."

"It's all over there," Alma said, "and I'm from Harlan County, Kentucky, and I've been to Detroit and once to Cincinnati, and I'm not going to apologize for it."

And Bahram laughed. Properly, out loud, head back — the only time she heard him do it in the whole first thousand hours — and he laughed so long that a judge came over to see if something was wrong.

"That," he said, when he could, "is the first honest thing anyone in this country has ever said to me about it."

"Well, where is it?"

"Two thousand miles from Egypt. Further than you are from Mexico." He steered them past the stage. "There is a sea between us and them and a desert on the other side and a different alphabet and a different language and a different religion for two thousand years before theirs. And I want to be fair — I could not find Kentucky on a map in 1924. I thought all of America was flat."

"It's not flat."

"I have since learned that it is not flat," he said gravely.

— — —

They arrived, over about a week, at the deal.

She would call him Barney out on the floor, because everybody did, because the alternative was a small war every hour with a man on a microphone. And off the floor — in the parts department, in the fifteen, at the hatch, in the dark where nobody was selling anything — she would use his name.

She practiced it. She was bad at it for four days and then she had it.

"Say it again," he said, the first time she got it clean.

She said it again.

"Once more."

"Barney — "

"Once more, please."

She said it a third time.

"Thank you," Bahram said, and did not explain, and got up at the horn and went out and answered to Barney for nine hours.

11. MOCK WEDDING

Doyle announced it on a Thursday for the following Saturday and he put it on handbills all over Wyandotte and Lincoln Park and River Rouge.

**SEE THEM MARRIED ON THE FLOOR!
THE FIRST MARATHON WEDDING IN MICHIGAN
SAT. NITE — 25¢ — DOYLE FERRIN PRESENTS**

The couple were nineteen and twenty-one and their names were Vern and Bernice and they had come in from Trenton with two dollars between them. They had not been engaged. They had known each other four weeks, three of them on that floor.

Doyle had offered them fifty dollars.

— — —

"They cannot be serious."

"They took the money," Alma said.

"Yes. Of course they took the money." Bahram was walking her hard, faster than the tempo, which he did when he was upset and denied doing. "That is not the part. Do they understand that it will be real?"

"It's not real. It's a stunt."

"There is a minister coming."

"He's a — " Alma had heard this from Ida. "He's a real minister, but there's no license. Doyle's not paying for a license. It's a show."

Bahram stopped dead in the middle of the floor, which you were not supposed to do, and a judge's head came around.

"Then it is worse," he said.

— — —

She could not get him past it and it took the better part of two days to understand why, and when she did understand it she was ashamed of how long it had taken.

"It is not the money," he said, at four in the morning. "Everybody in this building is doing it for money and I would be a hypocrite. It is that they will stand in front of a man of God in front of a paying crowd and say the words, and then it will not have happened."

"That's the joke of it. That's the point."

"Yes." He walked her around. "Where I am from, a wedding is three days. It is not an afternoon, it is three days, and half the town is in it, and there are things that must be said by the bride's people and things that must be said by the groom's, and there is a moment — " He stopped. "There is a moment when they hold a cloth over the two of them and rub two loaves of sugar together above it, so that the life will be sweet. Somebody's aunt does it. It is always somebody's aunt."

Alma had never heard him describe anything from home that was not either a mountain or a grievance.

"And?"

"And I will never have it," Bahram said.

The band was two men.

"There is no one to hold the cloth," he said. "There is no aunt. There is nobody in this hemisphere who would know what to do, and by the time I am dead there will be nobody anywhere who remembers that I was supposed to have it. So." He took the corner. "So it is difficult to watch two children in Michigan throw it in the street for fifty dollars, and I am aware that this is not their fault, and I am aware that I am being unbearable."

"You're not being unbearable."

"I am being unbearable," he said, "but thank you."

— — —

The Saturday drew fourteen hundred people, which was the best gate since the first weekend.

They cleared a space in the middle of the maple and the remaining thirty-six couples went around the outside of it in a slow ring, still moving, because nobody was excused, and Vern and Bernice stood in the middle and did not stop moving either — they swayed the whole way through it, side to side, because a judge was eleven feet away.

Fitz played the wedding march on the piano with a lot of vibrato.

Bernice had a veil made of cheesecloth and a bunch of yellow flowers that Ida had got from somewhere. She was crying before the minister opened his mouth and she cried all the way through it and Alma could not tell from any distance whether it was joy or exhaustion or the plain animal fact of ninety-one hours without sleep, and thought, going around the ring with her head on Bahram's shoulder, that probably Bernice couldn't have told her either.

The minister was a real minister. He was about sixty and he had a bad cold and he said the words correctly and gravely and did not play to the crowd once. When he got to for richer for poorer the whole building made a noise, and he waited it out with his eyes shut.

They said it. Both of them. They said all of it.

And then Doyle Ferrin came out on the maple with the microphone and put one hand on Vern's shoulder and one hand on Bernice's and said:

"Folks — the first married couple in the history of the Rialto!"

And fourteen hundred people stood up, and the band went into something fast, and the silver started coming down.

That was the other thing. Doyle had told the crowd to bring change. The coins came out of the bleachers and hit the maple and rolled, and Vern went down on his knees to pick them up — on his knees, which was a disqualification, and Doyle waved the judge off, which was the only time Alma ever saw a rule bent in that building — and Bernice stood in the middle of it in a cheesecloth veil with her hands over her face.

Eleven dollars and some, Ida said afterward. Plus the fifty.

— — —

They went out in the fifth week. Bernice's ankle turned during a figure-eight and Vern took her down with him, and Doyle gave them a beautiful send-off, and the band played their verse, and the crowd sang along.

Alma never found out what happened to them. She looked, once, in 1938, in a telephone directory in a public library, for a Vern and Bernice in Trenton, Michigan, and there was nothing, and she closed the book and did not look again.

— — —

"Do you want to know the worst thing?" Bahram said, that Saturday night, after the crowd had gone and the coins were swept up.

"There's a worse thing?"

"They will be married," he said. "Not on paper. But they will believe it, because they said it out loud in front of a minister and a thousand people, and in ten years they will not be able to remember that it was not real. That is how it works. You say a thing in front of enough people and it becomes true whether or not anyone has written it down."

He turned her at the corner.

"That is the most dangerous thing I know about this country," he said, "and I have been trying to explain it to myself for eight years, and tonight I finally saw it done properly."

12. ZOMBIE TREADMILL

Ida changed the bottle in the third week and did not mention it.

Alma knew because of the licorice. The licorice had always been on top of something and now the something had come up through it, a flat metal taste at the back of the tongue that stayed for an hour, and the warmth that used to come twenty minutes after arrived in four.

"This is different."

"It's the same bottle, hon."

"Ida."

Ida looked at her for a second and a half.

"It's stronger," she said. "There's twenty-nine couples left and Ferrin wants eight by the end of the month and a person can't do that on beef stew." She capped it. "You want the old one, I'll give you the old one, and you'll be out by Friday."

Alma drank it.

— — —

The sounds went first.

That was the part nobody had warned her about and the part she could never afterward describe to anyone in a way that made sense. It was not that things got louder. It was that they stopped being sounds and started being touch.

The cymbal became a thing that landed on the skin of her face.

The air horn — the air horn stopped being possible. She would stand in the last minute of the forty-five with her whole body braced against a thing that had not happened yet, and when it came it went through her like a hand pushing her chest, and twice she found she had put her arms up.

"It is the bottle," Bahram said.

"It's not the bottle."

"Alma. It is the bottle."

"Then why aren't you — "

"I am," he said. "I have been for four days. The lights have edges on them. There is a green line around Doyle." He turned her at the corner. "I did not tell you because I was hoping I was the only one, and if that seems stupid to you, I agree."

— — —

The zombie treadmill was on the eighteenth day.

Doyle explained it to the crowd with real pleasure. The couples were blindfolded — actual cloth, tied around the eyes — and then bound together at the wrist with a leather strap, and then they raced. Twenty-five laps of the outside of the floor, blind, roped, at speed.

Alma stood at the rail while Ida tied the cloth and understood that she was frightened in a way she had not been since July.

“Don’t fight it,” Chick said, going past. “Fella that fights it goes into the bleachers. Just let your feet do it. Your feet know the room.”

The horn.

— — —

Here is what she could remember of it afterward, which was not much and was not in order.

The floor was longer than the room. She knew the room was ninety feet and the floor under her went on for a great deal more than ninety feet and there was no contradiction in it at all; it simply was.

The crowd was above her and also below her.

There was a bird.

It was in the roof. It was in the girders over the bandstand and its wings went out past the walls of the building on both sides and it was made of gold and blue in flat pieces like a window in a church, and it was not frightening. That was the thing she came back to for the next forty years. She had never in her life seen anything less frightening. She was blindfolded and roped to a man and running, and there was an enormous bird in the ceiling of an automobile showroom in Ecorse, Michigan, and she felt about it exactly the way you feel when somebody sits down next to your bed.

She was crying inside the blindfold before the tenth lap and she did not know it until it got to her chin.

They came thirteenth. Somebody went into the bleachers on the eighth lap and it was not them.

— — —

"There was a bird," she said, in the parts department, with the cloth still in her hand.

Bahram was sitting on the edge of the men's cot with his head down between his knees and it took him a long moment to lift it.

"What?"

"In the roof. A bird." She was shaking. "Barney, I'm going out of my mind."

"No."

"There was a bird — "

"Alma." He got up and came around the end of the canvas, which was not allowed. "Listen to me. What did it look like."

"Gold. And blue. Like — like a window."

He sat down on the floor next to her cot with his back against the wall.

"All right," he said. "Then I have to tell you about Zal, and I am going to do it now, out of order, and badly, because we have nine minutes."

— — —

"There was a baby born in the mountains," he said, "and his hair was white."

"White."

"Snow white, from the day he came out. His father was a great man and he looked at that child and he was ashamed of him. He thought it was a curse or a devil's child or a punishment, and he could not bear that the country would see it." Bahram had his eyes shut. "So he took the baby up onto a mountain and he left it on the rock. To die. Because it was easier than being looked at."

Alma had gone very still.

"And there was a bird," Bahram said. "She is called the Simorgh. She is old — she is older than everything, she has seen the world burn three times — and she nests on that mountain, and she came down to take the baby to feed her own young. And she picked him up. And she looked at him."

"And?"

"And she did not eat him. She took him back up to the nest and she raised him. For years. She fed him and she taught him to speak and she kept him warm under her wing, and he grew up in a nest on a rock with birds, and he did not know he was a man."

The horn was going to go in three minutes. She could feel it coming the way you feel a train.

"His father dreamed about him," Bahram said, "years later, when he was old. And he went up the mountain, and he stood at the bottom of the rock and called, and the Simorgh looked at the boy — who was grown by then, a young man with white hair, who could speak the language of birds — and she said: there is your father. He has come for you. You may go."

"Did he go?"

"He went." Bahram opened his eyes. "That is the part nobody can ever explain. He went. She gave him a feather and she said, if you ever need me, burn this and I will come, and he walked down the mountain to the man who left him on it, and he never once, in the whole rest of the poem, said a word about it."

Alma sat on a cot in a parts department with a blindfold in her fist.

"Why are you telling me this."

"Because you saw her," Bahram said, "and I did not want you to spend one hour thinking you were mad. You are not mad. You are a person who has not slept in eighteen days and something in you went and found the biggest thing I ever gave you and put it in the roof."

"Barney — "

"And because the story is not about a bird," he said. "It is about a man who left a child on a rock because he could not bear to be looked at, and then lived to be old, and dreamed."

She said nothing at all.

The horn went off, and went through her chest like a hand, and they got up and went out and walked.

13. THE HORSE

It happened at half past three in the morning on the nineteenth day and it took eleven seconds.

Alma had gone out at cot call to find Ida, because the arch of her right foot had started doing something she needed a name for, and Ida was not in the parts department, and the light was on over the card table in the little office that used to be where they wrote up the finance on a Studebaker.

The door was open four inches.

Doyle was at the desk with the ledger. Bahram was standing in front of it.

Doyle counted bills off a roll — she could see his thumb doing it, three, four, five — and put them on the desk and turned them around, and Bahram picked them up and folded them once and put them in his trouser pocket.

Neither of them said anything. That was the part. There was no conversation. It was the eleven-second transaction of two men who had done it before and had nothing left to arrange.

Then Doyle said, "Same Friday," and Bahram said, "Yes," and Alma got herself back around the corner of the corridor before the door moved.

— — —

She lay on the cot for the rest of the fifteen with her eyes open and her heart going like a bird in a box, and she did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic came out clean the first time, which was how she knew she had been stupid for nineteen days.

A man who knew to slide his feet on the first night. A man told me at the door. He was very sure.

A man who knew, on day one, that the arch comes down. That you would want the cot in the light. That the fifteen minutes would start being stolen from you.

A man who had never done this before.

A man who said, on the very first night, in front of nineteen hundred people, not one word from that man is going to be true — and who was, at that moment, on the payroll of that man, and had been since before she walked in the door.

They had not been matched. She had stood in a line in a green dress and Doyle Ferrin had walked down the row of men and put his hand on one and moved on and stopped at the third, and she had thought that was chance, and it was staging. It was the oldest staging there was. Chick had told her about it himself in the second week and she had listened to it as a story about other people.

They'll run a horse or two. Fella that knows the racket. Ferrin's got 'em in every town.

The horn went off and she got up and walked out onto the maple and put her hand in his.

— — —

She did not say anything for eleven hours.

That is not a figure of speech. She counted them later off the board, because she wanted to know, and it was eleven hours and about twenty minutes, from the half past three until nearly three in the afternoon, and in all that time she did not speak one word to him.

He knew inside of ten minutes. She felt him find out — a change in the hand on her back — and then she felt him decide not to ask.

So he talked.

He talked the entire eleven hours. He talked through four meals and a heel-and-toe derby and the whole grey hollow middle of a Wednesday morning when the bleachers were empty and the band was Fitz alone and the room smelled of the mop. He told her about

the three brothers who divided the world and the youngest one, Iraj, who got the best of it and gave it back and was murdered by the other two anyway. He told her about a man in Constantinople who painted numbers on buses and had opinions about the numeral seven. He told her about the day the Rouge went to four dollars and what the line sounded like when the word came down it.

And every time she went — every time her head came down on his shoulder and her eyes went — she came back up somewhere else on the floor with his voice still going, unbroken, in the middle of a sentence, holding the place.

He did not once ask her what was wrong.

— — —

At three in the afternoon on the twentieth day she said:

"I saw Doyle pay you."

Bahram walked her four steps.

"Yes," he said.

"That's it?"

"You asked me a question that was not a question." He took the corner. "Ask me the real one."

"How long."

"Since the second of September. Twenty-two days before it opened." His voice had nothing in it. "He was hiring in a room over a hardware store on Fort Street and there were sixty men there, and he took four of us."

"To do what."

"To last." Bahram said it simply. "That is the whole job. He needs a floor that does not empty out in ten days. So he pays men who know how to stand up, and they stand up, and it looks like a contest. Chick and Dot are on it. There is a man called Prescott on it who went out in the second week because Doyle told him to."

Alma's mouth was very dry.

"And me," she said.

"You are not on it."

"I mean — was I part of it. The pairing."

"Yes."

She stopped.

"Keep walking," Bahram said, "or a judge comes."

She kept walking.

"He walked down that line and he had already chosen," she said.

"He had chosen before he came out of the office." Bahram's jaw was tight. "He gave me a number in the afternoon. Number sixty-three. I did not know your name until he said it."

"Why me?"

"I did not ask," Bahram said. "I want to be exactly truthful with you and that is the truthful answer. I did not ask him why, because I had eleven dollars and I did not want to hear anything that would make it harder to take the job."

— — —

They went around the floor twice.

"How much," she said.

"Five dollars a week."

"Five — " She laughed, and it came out wrong, and a judge looked over. "Five dollars a week. To sell me."

"To stand up," Bahram said. "I want to be precise about what I was paid for, because it is the only thing I have. He paid me to stay on this floor. He did not pay me to lie to you. He did not pay me for anything I have said to you in nineteen days and he has never once asked me what we talk about." He turned them at the corner. "And I have not told him one word. Not one. He has asked me twice and I have said nothing both times, and if you want to know what I have been buying with five dollars a week, that is it, and I would like it entered in the record."

"You should have told me."

"Yes."

"On the first night. You should have — you stood there and you told me he'd lie to me — "

"Yes," Bahram said.

"Why didn't you?"

And he said, after a long moment, and this was the sentence she took out and looked at for the next thirty-nine years:

"Because you were the only person in Michigan who did not already know something about me that was not true, and I wanted one more day of it. And then I wanted one more day of it. And then it was nineteen days and it had become a thing I had done rather than a thing I had not said."

— — —

Doyle came past at the horn with the microphone off.

"Everything all right over here?"

"Yes," Alma said.

Doyle looked at her, then at Bahram, then back at her, and he had the pleasantest face she had ever seen on a man.

"Good," he said. "Because I got something planned for you two."

14. THE COT IN THE LIGHT

What Doyle had planned was that they were going to be leaders.

He announced it on the Friday. Twenty-six couples left, and the judges had made their selection, and from tonight the eight best would take their fifteen minutes out on the maple in front of the house, under the spotlight, on the iron cots, where the people who had paid a quarter could watch them sleep.

Number sixty-three was on the list.

Alma stood at the rail and heard her own number and felt her whole body come up off the floor with relief.

That was the thing. That was the thing she could not get over, standing there — that a man had bought her partner before she'd ever walked in the building, and had chosen her off a card in a ledger for reasons she still did not know, and had been building something out of the two of them for three weeks, and had now decided to put her body on public display for fifteen minutes an hour — and her entire animal self had risen up in that moment and said thank God, I can lie down.

Bahram had told her this would happen on the second night.

He did not say anything about it now. She checked his face for it and there was nothing there, and she was so grateful for the nothing that she nearly said his name out loud in front of everybody.

— — —

She had not forgiven him. She wanted that on the record too.

They had had one more conversation about it, on the Thursday, and it had been short.

"Are you going to stop?"

"Taking his money?" Bahram considered it. "No."

"No?"

"If I give it back he replaces me," he said. "There are three other men on that payroll and he does not need four. And if he replaces me, he replaces me tomorrow, and you are paired with a stranger at hour four hundred, and you will not survive that. Neither would I." He turned them at the corner. "So no. I am going to keep taking five dollars a week from a man I dislike in order to remain the person holding you up. If there is a clean way to do that I have not found it in three days of looking."

And that was the entire trouble with him, she thought, and it was going to be the trouble with him right to the end: he was never once wrong, and it never once helped.

— — —

The cots came out at midnight.

There is no describing it and she tried for years. You are given, at last, the thing you have wanted more than food — a flat surface, and permission — and it is set down in the middle of a maple floor under a spotlight in front of six hundred people, and a man says your name into a microphone while you lie down on it.

You lie down anyway.

That was the discovery. She went down onto the canvas and it did not matter at all that they were watching. She had thought, standing at the rail, that she would feel it. She felt nothing. Somebody applauded. Somebody said something and somebody else laughed, and Doyle worked the house — there she is, folks, that's number sixty-three, she's been on her feet since the twenty-fourth of September — and Alma Sutter lay on an iron cot in a green dress in a cone of white light and was asleep in under nine seconds.

The shame came later. It came in the fifteen after, and it was not about being looked at.

It was that when the horn went, she had cried out. Out loud. In front of them. She heard herself do it as she came up, an animal noise of pure grief at being made to stand, and she got up and she saw a woman in the second row put her hand over her mouth, and Alma understood exactly what that woman had come for and exactly what she had just been given for twenty-five cents.

— — —

"You are going to want to tell me it is not so bad," she said, later.

"I am not going to tell you that."

"Good."

"It is worse than everything else in this building," Bahram said. "It is worse than the derbies. The derbies only take your legs."

He walked her past the bandstand.

"I have been trying to think of what it is," he said, "and I have got as far as this. In the poem there is a thing that happens to kings

when they turn bad. There is a light on them — every king has it, it is how you know he is the real one, it comes down on him from God and it sits on him like a — ” he made a small helpless gesture with the hand on her back “ — I do not have the word. A brightness. And when a king does the unforgivable thing, it goes out of him, and everyone can see it go, and after that he is just a man in a room.”

“And?”

“And that is the opposite,” Bahram said. “That is what I keep coming back to at four in the morning. It comes on you and it means you are finished. Doyle puts the light on the ones he has decided are ready to be watched coming apart.” He shook his head slightly. “It is the same light, Alma. It is exactly the same light. It has only been turned around.”

— — —

Her right foot went on the twentieth day.

Not dramatically. There was no moment. She stepped down onto it in the second hour after a figure-eight derby and something in the middle of it did not answer, and she went sideways and he had her before her knee got anywhere near the maple, and nobody saw.

“Ida,” she said, in the fifteen.

Ida knelt down on the parts department floor and took the shoe off and put both thumbs into the arch and Alma made a sound.

“Mm,” Ida said.

“What’s mm.”

“It’s coming down.” She turned the foot in the light. “It’s not gone. It’s coming.”

“How long have I got.”

“Hon,” Ida said, “I ain’t going to tell you that, because you’ll spend it.” She put the shoe back on and laced it tight, tighter than Alma would have, and tied it off. “Two things. You keep that shoe on from here to the end, waking and sleeping, and I mean the end, whatever end that is. You take it off and the swelling comes up and it don’t go back in.”

"And the other thing?"

Ida stood up with a hand on the cot and her knees cracking.

"Don't tell the Sheik," she said. "He'll carry you. And then it'll be his feet too, and then there ain't nobody left standing."

Alma looked up at her.

"Ida," she said. "How many of these have you done?"

"Eleven years."

"And how many of them end all right?"

Ida picked up her bottles.

"Get your fifteen," she said.

— — —

They put them on the cots in the light every night after that, and every night the crowd was a little smaller, and on the fourteenth night of October, which was a Friday, Alma lay down under the spotlight at eleven o'clock and slept for eleven minutes and dreamed about nothing at all.

15. FIVE HUNDRED

Sonny hung the five and the double naught on the Saturday afternoon and Doyle made a small ceremony of it.

Five hundred hours. Twenty days and twenty hours. Doyle had the band play a fanfare and got the four hundred people in the bleachers to count it down out loud from ten while the boy went up the ladder, and then he had the twenty-two remaining couples stand in a line at the rail — still moving, side to side, always side to side — and he went along the line saying their numbers and where they were from, and the crowd gave each one a hand.

"Number sixty-three," Doyle said. "Alma Sutter, Harlan County, Kentucky, by way of Beaufait Street. And her partner. Folks — the Sheik of Ecorse."

The applause was warm. There were people in that room who had been there four nights a week for three weeks.

Alma smiled and raised a hand and did not hear any of it, because at that moment her entire being was concentrated on the middle of her right foot.

— — —

It had started at about four that morning and by noon it was the only thing in the world.

The arch had come down. Not all at once, not with a sound, the way she had somehow expected — it had simply gone on going down, the way a roof goes down, over hours, and at some point in the small hours of the morning of the fifteenth of October the thing that had been holding the middle of her foot up had stopped doing it, and now every step put the whole of her weight through a place that had never been built to take weight.

It felt like standing on a hot stone.

It felt, at other moments, like standing on a stone that was inside the foot rather than under it.

Ida had a name for none of it. Ida knelt down at the four o'clock, and looked, and did not put her thumbs in this time, and said, "Well."

"Well what."

"Well, it's down."

"What do I do?"

"You keep the shoe on," Ida said. "And you shift it. You put more on the left. And in about four days the left one's going to start, and then you shift it back, and that's how it goes till the end."

"Ida — "

"Hon, I'd lie to you if I thought it'd help," Ida said, and got up.

— — —

She did not tell him. She had promised Ida and she kept it, and it lasted about nine hours, which she thought later was a fairly good showing.

He found out at the one o'clock in the morning because she went down at the corner by the fire door and this time it was not a lean, it was a drop, and he got both arms under her and it was not eight seconds, it was closer to forty, and a judge saw the whole thing and stood there with his hands behind his back and watched and did not call it, and Alma could never work out why.

"How long," Bahram said, when she was upright.

"Since four."

"This morning?"

"Yes."

He said something in his own language, one word, short, and it was the only time in eleven hundred hours she ever heard him do it.

"Which foot."

"Right."

He steered her over to the outside line and put himself on her right side, and from that hour to the end of the contest he never once walked on her left again.

— — —

They found a way to do it inside a night.

He took her weight on the turns. That was the main thing. She would come round on the bad foot and there would be a hand under her elbow lifting about a third of her off the maple for the half-second it took, and it was so small that she doubted a judge four feet away could have named it.

They shortened the stride.

And they invented, between them, in the small hours of the fifteenth of October, a thing they never gave a name to, in which he would say Jamshid and she would do the turn — out, under, around — because the turn came off the ball of the foot and not the arch, and it bought her three or four steps of relief, and by the end of that night she was doing it thirty times an hour.

"You are going to wear that story out," he said.

"It's the only one that doesn't hurt."

"Then it is the right one," Bahram said. "You may have it. It was never mine anyway."

— — —

Nothing else happened on the fifteenth of October.

That was the truth of it and she went over it a great many times afterward, over years, looking for something in it, and there was nothing.

The gate was four hundred at the matinée and six hundred at night. There was a figure-eight derby at seven and they came out fourteenth. A couple from Ypsilanti went out at ten past nine when the woman's shoulder came out of the socket during a turn, and Doyle gave them a beautiful send-off, and the band played, and the crowd sang, and Doyle wrote their verse on a cigarette paper on the corner of the bandstand:

*I saw my mother in the second row,
I saw a bird as wide as Ohio,
I'd tell you the rest but I got to go —
So hold me up till the horn.*

Alma heard it for the first time at half past ten on the night of the fifteenth of October, standing on a foot that had come down that morning, and she thought: he saw one too, then. And she looked for the man from Ypsilanti to ask him about the bird, and he had already gone out the door.

The cots came out at midnight. She was on them, in the light, and she slept eleven minutes.

At two in the morning she ate a plate of eggs standing up.

At four she was awake enough to be walked, and Bahram was telling her something about a horse — that Rostam's horse had to be chosen out of an entire kingdom of horses and that he had tested every one by pressing his hand down on its back, and every horse in Persia went down under the hand, hundreds of them, one after another, for years, until at last there was one that stood.

"How long did that take him?"

"The poem does not say. Years."

"Every horse in the country."

"Every horse in the country," Bahram said, "and I want you to understand that this is not a story about a horse. It is a story about how long a man will go on putting his hand down."

At six they gave them coffee. At seven the mop came out.

At eight in the morning of the sixteenth of October, Sonny came up the ladder and took down the double naught and hung up a one and a six, and the day went on, and the crowd came in at noon, and the twenty-two couples that were left kept moving.

III. SILVER SHOWER

16. SILVER SHOWER

Doyle came to her with it on a Tuesday, alone, without the microphone.

"Twenty-two couples," he said. "Six hundred hours Wednesday. And I got two hundred people in that house on a weeknight and I'm paying a band."

"That's not my trouble."

"It's everybody's trouble, sweetheart, that's the beauty of it." He said it pleasantly. He was leaning on the rail while she went past and he timed the sentences to her circuits, picking up where he'd left off each time she came round, which took a kind of skill she had to admire. "I want to run a silver shower Saturday."

"I don't know what that is."

"Sure you do. You've seen it." He nodded at the bleachers. "I put a couple up front. I hand 'em the mic. They tell the folks about themselves — where they're from, what brung 'em here, the hard part. And the folks throw change on the floor. And whatever lands, they keep."

Alma went around.

"How much does it land," she said, when she came back.

"Bernice and Vern got eleven dollars."

"Eleven dollars."

"That was a wedding," Doyle said. "That's the ceiling." He straightened off the rail. "Think about it. I'll ask the Sheik too but he'll say no. He says no to everything and then he does it."

— — —

Bahram said no.

"He'll come back," Alma said.

"He will come back on Friday and he will offer money," Bahram agreed. "And I will say no on Friday as well, and then he will find

another way, because a man like that does not go through a wall, he goes around it, and he has three weeks."

"He said you'd say no and then do it."

Bahram was quiet for a step or two.

"Did he," he said.

— — —

She did it on the Saturday and she did not tell him beforehand.

That was deliberate. She sat with it through the whole of Friday and she worked out, quite coldly, that if she told him he would argue, and that he would be right, and that she would then have to either lose the argument or go against him having lost it, and both of those were more expensive than simply walking out onto the maple on a Saturday night and taking the microphone out of Doyle Ferrin's hand.

Eight hundred people. Best gate in nine days.

"Number sixty-three," Doyle said. "Alma Sutter."

And he gave her the microphone and stepped back, and the band went quiet, and she stood in the middle of a maple floor moving side to side because a judge was watching, holding a live microphone, in front of eight hundred people, with her right arch flat and her hands shaking.

— — —

She had planned to tell them about Harlan County.

That was what she had decided in the small hours, that she would tell them about the mines and about Roy and about coming north for five dollars a day, and she opened her mouth to do it and what came out was:

"There was a boy."

The room went very still.

She would think about that first sentence for the rest of her life — where it came from, why it came, whether some part of her had planned it and not told the rest. She was never able to decide.

"There was a boy," she said, "and he was a king's son, and he was the best of them. That's not me talking. Everybody said it. He was straight and he was good and he was the only one in the whole family worth a damn."

Somebody in the bleachers laughed at worth a damn and somebody else shushed them.

"And the king's wife — she wasn't his mother, his mother was gone — she took a shine to him. And when he wouldn't have her, she went to the king and she said the boy had come after her. And she cried when she said it, and she was good at it, and the king believed her."

She had them. She could feel it. It was the strangest sensation she had ever had, eight hundred people going quiet in a body.

"So they said, all right. There's a way to settle this. And they built two fires." Her voice did something on fires and she let it. "Two mountains of thorn wood, a hundred yards apart, and they lit them both, and they said: if you're innocent, ride through. Ride between them. And if you're telling the truth, God'll bring you out the other side."

"Did he do it?" a woman shouted.

"He did it," Alma said. "He put on white. He got up on a black horse and he rode into the fire in white clothes in front of the whole country, and there was so much smoke nobody could see anything for a long time, and everybody stood there. And then he came out the other side."

The bleachers made a sound.

"Not a mark on him," she said. "Not a mark on the horse. Not a hair of it burned."

She let it sit the way she had watched Doyle let things sit for four weeks.

"And it didn't matter," Alma said. "That's the thing I come to tell you. He proved it in front of God and everybody and it did not matter one bit. His father couldn't look at him after. Couldn't stand him in the house. Sent him off to a war on the other side of the world to be rid of the shame of what he'd nearly done to him." She was crying now and she did not stop. "And they killed him out there. They cut his throat over a basin and they poured him out on the ground like he was nothing, and he was twenty-some years old, and he had never done one wrong thing in his life."

Somewhere in the second row a woman was crying with her.

"And I want to tell you what happened where the blood went in," Alma said. "A plant come up. Out of the dirt. Right where it soaked in. It come up green and it kept coming up green and they couldn't kill it and it's growing there yet."

She stopped.

The first coin came down before she had the microphone away from her mouth.

— — —

Twenty-two dollars and forty cents.

It took four men eleven minutes to sweep it and Ida counted it in a cigar box and Doyle stood over her while she did it and did not touch any of it, which Alma noticed.

"Twenty-two forty," Ida said.

"That's a record," Doyle said. He sounded genuinely delighted. "That's a record for this outfit and I've been running it since '29." He looked at Alma and there was nothing in his face but professional pleasure. "Where'd you get all that?"

"I made it up."

"Sure you did," Doyle said, and laughed, and went to find the band.

— — —

Bahram was on the far side of the floor when she came back out and he had not moved for the whole of it.

They walked half a circuit before either of them spoke.

"Siyavash," he said.

"Yes."

"You got the horse wrong. It was black, that is correct. You did not say his name."

"I didn't want to say his name."

"No," Bahram said. "I noticed that."

They went around. The bleachers were emptying. Fitz was playing something slow.

"Say the thing," Alma said.

"I am not going to say a thing."

"Say it. You've been holding it for twenty minutes."

He walked her past the bandstand.

"You told eight hundred people a story about a boy who was accused of something he did not do," Bahram said, "and who proved it in front of everyone, and who was destroyed anyway. And they gave you twenty-two dollars." He took the corner. "And I sat here and watched you and I could not work out whether you had chosen it or whether it had chosen you, and I have decided I do not want to know, and I am not going to ask, because I told you in the first week that I would not ask you anything."

Alma said nothing at all.

"It is a beautiful story," he said. "It is one of the two or three most beautiful things in the poem and I gave it to you nine days ago and now it is worth twenty-two dollars and forty cents." He was looking straight ahead. "I am not angry with you. I want to be clear. I am trying to work out whether I am angry with myself for teaching you or with him for building the machine, and while I am working it out I would like to keep walking and not talk."

So they kept walking and did not talk.

At the horn he said, without any preamble at all:

"Do it again next week."

"What?"

"Do it again," Bahram said. "Twenty-two dollars is twenty-two dollars, and you will be off this floor sooner than either of us wants, and I would rather you left here with something in your hand." He held the door for her, and stood back, and said, "After you."

And she was too tired to argue about the door, and went through first, and that was the only time in eleven hundred hours it happened.

17. SEVEN TRIALS

They built it over four nights in the last week of October and it was the only thing either of them ever made.

It started because of the foot. She could do the Jamshid turn thirty times an hour and it bought her three steps of relief each time, and by the six hundred and twentieth hour she was doing it so often that Doyle had begun calling it out from the microphone — there she goes, folks, there's that spin — and the crowd had started to expect it.

"We need more of them," Alma said.

"More turns?"

"More stories that don't hurt."

Bahram walked her four or five steps.

"There are seven," he said.

— — —

He explained the shape of it first, at three in the morning, with the bleachers down to twenty people.

"There is a man called Rostam and he is the largest thing in the poem. Everything else in six hundred years bends around him. And early on, when he is young, the king of the country is taken prisoner in a place full of devils and blinded, and Rostam has to go and get him."

"Alone?"

"With his horse." He said it with a straight face. "The horse is a character. I want that understood."

"The one he tested every horse in the country to find."

"That one. Rakhsh." He turned her. "And the road is seven days long and there is one thing on each day, and you have to get through all seven, and that is the whole of it. Seven. They are called the Seven Trials and every child where I am from can count them off on their fingers."

"So teach me the seven."

"I am not going to teach you the seven," Bahram said. "I am going to build you the seven, and it is going to take four nights, and at the end of it you will have seven things you can do with your feet when your feet are finished. That is not a story. That is a tool."

— — —

The first was the lion.

Rostam sleeps and the horse fights the lion alone and kills it and does not wake him, and in the morning Rostam is angry — if you had died, how would I have got there on foot? — which was, Bahram said, the single most Persian sentence in sixty thousand lines: a man being furious with a horse for saving his life inefficiently.

The step was a drop and a recovery. She let her weight go on the good foot for a half-beat and he took it and gave it back. It moved eleven pounds off the bad arch for the length of a bar.

The second was the desert with no water.

Three days of it. The horse going down. Rostam walking with his shield up against the sun and lying down to die, and then a ram walking past him, and he follows the ram because a ram must be going somewhere, and it goes to water.

The step was a long slow sideways trail, four counts, weight almost entirely on the left leg, the right foot only skimming the maple. It was the best of the seven. She could do it for a full chorus.

The third was the dragon.

It came out of the dark three times and twice the horse woke him and twice he saw nothing and shouted at the horse, and the third time he saw it. The step was a fast double turn, both feet on the balls, and it was the only one of the seven that hurt, and she kept it because it woke her up.

The fourth was the witch.

She came to him as a beautiful girl with a cup of wine and sat down beside him and he did not know what she was, and he said a blessing over the wine, and the moment he said it her face came off.

"That is the one," Bahram said, "that people remember wrong. They think he saw through her. He did not see through her. He said a thing out of habit and it was the habit that saved him."

The step was a stop. A dead stop on both feet, one count, and then away. It was the only thing in the whole four nights that was not motion and it was worth more than the rest of them together.

The fifth was the man in the reeds.

Rostam catches a watchman by the ears and the head comes off in his hand. There was no step for the fifth. Bahram tried three and threw them all out.

"Some of them are only a sentence," he said. "Not everything has to be a step. Leave it."

The sixth was the giant.

A thing the size of a hill that fights him with a tree in each hand, and Rostam beats it, and this was the only one Bahram would not simplify — he did the whole thing, all of it, in the two hours before dawn on the third night, and Alma held onto his shoulders and let herself be moved and did not have to think for a hundred and ten minutes.

The step was a lift. Not much of one — an inch, maybe two, on the second beat of every bar, both her feet coming off the maple entirely for a half-second while he took all of her.

"You can't do that all night."

"No," Bahram said. "You may have it four times an hour and no more, and you are going to have to keep count yourself, because I will give it to you every time you ask and then in a week I will not be able to walk."

The seventh was the White Div.

The devil in the cave, in the dark. Rostam goes in blind and they fight and it takes off his hand — no, she had that wrong, he took off its hand, and then its head — and there was blood, and the blood was the point, because you had to bring the blood back and put it in the king's eyes and that was what gave the man his sight again.

"His blood cures blindness."

"His blood cures blindness," Bahram agreed. "Do not ask me why. It is a thousand years old. It has been asked."

The step for the seventh was the biggest thing they made. Six counts, all the way around, a full circle with the man as the axis and her weight passed off her right foot three separate times inside it. It looked, from the bleachers, like the fanciest thing on the floor. It was pure engineering.

— — —

They ran the whole set for the first time on the thirty-first of October at about four in the morning and it took eleven minutes and nobody saw it.

There were nine people in the bleachers. Fitz was alone at the piano. Chick and Dot were on the far side, moving in a slow figure with their heads down on each other.

Alma went through all seven, in order, in the middle of an empty maple floor, and at the end of it she was upright and her foot was under her and she had not spoken a word for a quarter of an hour and had not needed to.

"That's it," she said. "That's all seven."

"That is all seven."

"How long will it hold me?"

"I do not know."

"Guess."

"A week," Bahram said. "Perhaps ten days. Then your left will come down and we will have to build the whole thing again backward, and there will not be time." He was breathing hard. "Do not ask me the next question."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were."

She was. She let it go.

— — —

Doyle put it in the show inside of three days, and by the first week of November there was a thing at the Rialto that the Free Press called the Persian dance, and eleven hundred people came out on a Saturday night in the fourth year of the Depression to see a woman in a green dress do it.

Nobody in that building ever knew what any of it was.

They did not know that the drop was a lion, or that the long trail across the floor was three days without water, or that the dead stop on both feet was a man saved by a habit he had not thought about. They knew it was pretty. They knew the girl with the bad foot did seven things in a row and that the last one went all the way around.

Alma Sutter did the Seven Trials of Rostam eleven or twelve times a night for the last three weeks of that contest in front of a paying crowd in Ecorse, Michigan, and she did them again forty years later in a kitchen in Dearborn with nobody watching, holding the edge of a sink, at seventy-one years old, and she still had all seven.

18. NURSE'S ROUND

Ida changed the bottle for the third time on the second of November and this time she said so.

"It's stronger."

"How much stronger."

"Hon," Ida said, "there's fourteen couples and he wants six by Sunday." She poured out the tin cup. "You can say no."

"Can I?"

"You can say no," Ida said, "and Chick and Dot will say yes, and Sunday you'll be on Beaufait Street."

Alma drank it.

— — —

It came on in ninety seconds.

That was the first wrong thing. It had always taken twenty minutes and then four, and this went through her in the time it took to walk from the hatch to the door of the parts department, and by the time she was on the maple her jaw had locked.

Not clenched. Locked. She put her hand up to her own face and could not open it and stood in the middle of the floor with her fingers on her own chin at eleven o'clock at night, in front of six hundred people, trying to work out whether she was going to be able to speak again.

"Alma."

She got it open. It made a sound.

"I'm all right."

"You are not all right, your pupils are — " Bahram took her chin and turned her face to the light and then let go as though it had burned him. "Do not take that again."

"You had it too."

"I am going to be sick in about an hour and I would like you not to look at me when it happens," he said. "Take my hand. Do not take that again."

— — —

Here is what she was able to say about the next nine hours, and she only ever said it once, in 1958, to a doctor who had asked her a different question.

The sound stopped being sound.

The cymbal was a hand on her face and she had known that for two weeks, but now the piano had edges, and the edges went into her arms, and a chord was not a noise, it was a shape that arrived at the skin and had corners on it. When Fitz went up the keyboard she felt it go up her spine, note by note, like somebody walking two fingers.

The light had a rim. Every light. The pendant lamp over the middle of the floor had a green ring around it about a foot wide and the ring was not still.

And the horn — she knew the horn was coming forty seconds before it came, every time, because the room got tight, and when it went off she was not able to keep her hands down. Twice she screamed. She knew she screamed because she saw the crowd react, and she could not hear herself do it, and after the second time Bahram put his hand flat over her sternum for a moment, which was not something he had ever done, and said, “You are in a building in Michigan and there are nine days left.”

— — —

At two in the morning the floor tilted and did not come back.

The whole maple went over about fifteen degrees toward the bandstand and stayed there, and she went with it, and there was no argument to be had with it — the floor was tilted, that was simply the state of the floor. She danced on a hill for four hours. She found that she was leaning against the slope with her whole body and that her right foot was uphill, which was a mercy, and she thought quite clearly: this is the best thing that has happened to my foot in three weeks.

At three she watched a man in the second row take his face off and put it in his lap.

He did it casually, the way you’d take off a hat. Then he put it back on. Then he did it again. Alma watched him do it maybe fifteen times and felt nothing at all about it, and it was only afterward, days later, that she understood the true horror of that hour was not

the man. It was that she had watched it and had not been frightened, because being frightened would have required believing she was somewhere that things like that did not happen.

At half past three the bird came back.

She was ready for it this time. It was in the girders and it came all the way across the roof, gold and blue, flat as a window, and it settled with its wings out over the whole of the building. And Alma, going around the tilted floor with her head on a man's shoulder, said out loud:

"You came."

"What?"

"Not you."

Bahram looked up at the roof.

"Is she here?"

"She's here."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Good," and kept walking, and Alma loved him for it in a way she was not able to examine for another thirty-nine years.

— — —

He was sick at four, behind the bandstand, and she stood in front of him with her back turned so that no judge coming past would have a clear line, and afterward he wiped his mouth on his sleeve and said, "Thank you," and they went back out.

At six the tilt came off the floor.

At seven Ida came down the row with the small bottle and Alma turned her face to the wall.

"It's the down one, hon."

"I don't want it."

"You want it," Ida said. "You don't take the down one after the up one, you'll lay there for fifteen minutes with your eyes open and your heart going and you'll come out worse than you went in." She

held out the cup. "That's the whole racket. That's how it works. Up one, down one, up one, down one, and that's why nobody who does one of these ever quite comes right afterward."

Alma took it.

"Ida," she said. "How long have you known that?"

"Eleven years."

"And you pour it anyway."

Ida capped the bottle and put it in the tray with the others and stood there a moment with her hand on the cot rail, an old woman with a bricklayer's hands at seven in the morning in a room that used to be where they kept the carburetors.

"There's a bottle in that tray for me too," she said. "You want to see it?"

Alma did not answer.

"Get your fifteen," Ida said.

— — —

It was three days before her hands were right and she never again went a whole day without the rim on the lights.

That was the other thing she did not know at the time and worked out later, over years: it did not stop when the contest stopped. She had the rim on the lights in 1934. She had it in 1941, faintly, on winter afternoons. In 1971 she could still, if the room was dim enough and she was tired enough, look at a bare bulb and see the green ring standing an inch off it, not quite still, and she never told anybody about it, and she never entirely minded it either.

19. THE PAPERWORK

Doyle sent Ida for her at ten past two in the afternoon on the fourth of November.

"He wants you in the office."

"I've got nine minutes."

"He knows what you got," Ida said, and would not look at her, and that was how Alma knew before she stood up.

— — —

The office had a window onto the floor with a blind half down. Doyle was behind the desk with the ledger shut and his hands flat on top of it and there was a second chair, which there had never been.

"Sit down."

"I'll stand."

"Alma," he said, "sit down. You got about eleven minutes and I don't want to spend four of 'em on that."

She sat down.

He did not do anything for a moment. He looked at his own hands on the ledger. Then he opened the top drawer and took out a manila envelope with a string closure and unwound the string and laid three sheets of paper on the desk and turned them around.

She did not need to read them.

She read them anyway, the way you touch a stove after you already know.

WAYNE COUNTY — SURRENDER OF CHILD FOR CARE — 11 JULY 1932. Her own signature at the bottom of the first page in a hand she did not recognize as hers, because her hand had been shaking. SUTTER, RUTH ANN. AGE 4 YR 2 MO. MOTHER: SUTTER, ALMA. FATHER: SUTTER, ROY — WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN.

And a second sheet, a carbon, stamped in October: STATUS — RESIDENT.

"Sit back," Doyle said. "You've gone grey."

— — —

"When did you get these."

"Fourteenth of October."

"How."

"I sent a fella." He said it without any embarrassment at all. "I always send a fella. Every contest, every town — first two weeks I run down everybody that's still standing. It's not personal, sweetheart, it's the business. I got twenty-two couples telling me twenty-two stories and I need to know which ones I can put on a handbill without some brother-in-law turning up with a lawyer."

"You've had them three weeks."

"I've had 'em three weeks."

"And you never said."

"No," Doyle said. "I did not."

Alma put her hands flat on her knees to stop them.

"Are you throwing me out?"

And Doyle Ferrin looked genuinely surprised, and then he laughed — not unkindly, he was never unkind, that was the thing she could never get past — and he said:

"Throwing you out?"

— — —

"Honey," he said, and leaned forward, "I got a woman on my floor who's been on her feet nine hundred and eighty hours on a busted arch and does that Persian thing that put eleven hundred people in here Saturday, and you think I want you out?"

"I lied on the form."

"Everybody lies on the form."

"It says — " her voice went " — it says that all statements given upon entry are true."

"It says that so I can throw you out if I want to throw you out," Doyle said. "That's the whole reason it's on there. That's what a form is." He sat back. "I ain't throwing you out. I want to talk to you about the eighteenth."

"The eighteenth of what?"

"November," Doyle said. "That's where this ends. That's my last date, the hall's let to a fella selling tractors after that, and I got to be in Fort Wayne on the twenty-second." He tapped the desk twice. "Fourteen couples. Election's Tuesday and my gate is going to fall through the goddamn floor, because there ain't a soul in Wayne County going to pay a quarter to watch you walk while there's returns coming in. Wednesday I'll have two hundred people. Thursday I'll have a hundred. And then I got to run this thing another ten days on a hundred people a night."

"That's not my — "

"It's about to be." Doyle put one finger on the papers. "I want to bring her here."

— — —

The room did something. She was aware of the blind, half down, and of the band starting up through the wall, and of a fly on the inside of the window.

"What?"

"I want to bring the little girl here," Doyle said, "and put her in your arms in front of a full house."

"No."

"Hear it out."

"No."

"Alma." He said her name the way he said things into the microphone, warm, unhurried, and it worked, it always worked. "Listen to what I'm actually saying. You went out there Saturday and you told 'em about a boy that rode through a fire and they threw twenty-two dollars on my floor. Twenty-two dollars for a story you made up." He spread his hands. "This one's true. This one's a mother that put her baby in a county home in July because she couldn't feed her, and danced six weeks to get her back. That ain't a stunt. That's the whole country. That is every single person in that bleacher and their sister."

"You'd put her on a floor."

"I'd put her in your arms."

"For a quarter a head."

"For a quarter a head," Doyle agreed, "and you'd walk out of here with your daughter and eight or nine hundred dollars of silver, and I'd walk out with a full house on a Wednesday, and I don't see the part where anybody's hurt. That's what I don't see and I've been sitting on these three weeks looking for it."

Alma stared at him.

"You've been sitting on it three weeks."

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because I needed a bad night to spend it on," Doyle said simply. "There's no point in it in October. It's worth nothing on a Saturday when I'm full anyway."

— — —

"He doesn't know," she said.

"Who? The Sheik?" Doyle shook his head. "No. And I ain't going to tell him. That's yours to tell or not tell, I don't get in the middle of that."

"You put me with him."

"I did."

"Why me?" Alma said. "Off the card. Number sixty-three. Out of ninety-one couples you had a man on the payroll and you gave him me — why?"

Doyle looked at her for a moment.

"Because you come in alone," he said, "and you told me at that table that you had a little girl and that you had her in July, and you didn't cry when you said it." He shrugged, and it was the most honest thing she ever saw him do. "Sweetheart, a woman that don't

cry when she says that is a woman that's got a long way left in her. I knew you'd go three weeks before you took your coat off."

— — —

The horn went through the wall.

Alma stood up. Her legs held, which surprised her.

"How long do I have to answer."

"Sunday."

"And if I say no?"

"Then you say no," Doyle said, "and we go on as we are, and you dance till the eighteenth and you take whatever you take, and I'll shake your hand at the door and mean it." He was already reaching for the ledger. "And you'll be about two hundred short of the year at the county home, and they charge by the quarter, and they'll have had her four months by Christmas."

He said that last part while he was opening the book. Not as a threat. As a fact he happened to know, offered in passing, because he had sent a fella and the fella had been thorough.

Alma went out onto the floor and put her hand in Bahram's and did not say one word about any of it for four days.

20. ECORSE ROAD

He asked Doyle for four hours on the Saturday morning and Doyle gave them to him.

Alma found out about it at eleven o'clock, on the floor, from a judge.

"Sixty-three, you're soloing this afternoon."

"I'm what?"

"Your partner's got leave. Twelve to four. You'll solo or you'll take a spare and there ain't a spare, so you'll solo." The judge was already walking off. "Same rules. Knees don't touch."

— — —

She got hold of him at the twelve o'clock horn, in the corridor, with one hand in his shirt.

"Where are you going."

"Out."

"Where."

"I will be back at four."

"Where, Bahram."

He looked at her, and she watched him decide not to lie, and she watched him decide not to answer either, which was worse.

"I am going to be gone four hours," he said, "and you are going to walk for four hours by yourself, and I am sorry about it, and it is the only thing I have asked this building for in six weeks."

"You're on his payroll — "

"Yes. That is why he said yes." Bahram took her hand off his shirt, not roughly, and held it a moment. "Alma. Do the seven. Do them in order and start again at the top and do not count the hours. Four hours is eleven rounds."

"Tell me where you're going."

"No," he said, and went.

— — —

Four hours alone on a maple floor.

She had not been alone on it since the twenty-fourth of September. Not for one minute of one hour, waking or otherwise, and she had not understood until that Saturday afternoon that the whole apparatus of her survival was a man's body, and that without it she was a woman of twenty-nine with a collapsed arch walking in a circle in a room.

There was nothing to lean on. That was the first thing. She kept reaching.

There was nobody to talk. That was the second, and it was worse, and by the second hour she was talking out loud to herself in a low

voice, saying the seven off on her fingers — lion, desert, dragon, witch, reeds, giant, div — and a judge came over at one point and put two fingers under her chin to check her eyes, and she said “I’m fine,” and he said, “I know. You’re saying things.”

The bleachers had maybe a hundred and fifty people in them. It was a matinée in the fourth year of the Depression and there was a woman in a green dress walking alone in the middle of an empty floor doing seven strange figures over and over, and after about ninety minutes of it, Alma realised that they had gone quiet.

Not gone away. Quiet. A hundred and fifty people in a dim room watching a woman by herself, and nobody eating, and nobody talking.

Chick came past on the outside in the third hour with Dot asleep on his shoulder.

“You’re all right,” he said.

“I’m not all right.”

“You’re upright.” He steered Dot around the corner. “That’s the whole of it, kid. Everything else is decoration.”

— — —

Bahram came back at four minutes past four.

She saw him come in the fire door at the far end and cross the floor toward her, and she was already going toward him, and he took her hands and put her straight back into the circle without breaking stride.

“You’re back.”

“Yes.”

“Where were you.”

“Alma — ”

“Where were you.”

He walked her a full half circuit before he said anything, and when he did he said:

"Do you remember that I told you I would not ask you anything?"

She stopped breathing.

"I have kept that," Bahram said. "For six weeks. I have never once asked you a question about July and I am not going to start today and I am not going to answer one either. That is the same promise. It only looks different from this side."

"That's not — that's not the same thing at all — "

"It is exactly the same thing," he said, "and I need you to let it be, and I am asking you, and I have never asked you for anything."

— — —

Here is what she noticed over the next thirty hours, and she noticed all of it and made nothing of any of it until Wednesday.

His coat. He had gone out in the brown coat he had come in with and he came back with it buttoned in a room that was seventy degrees and he did not take it off for the rest of the contest, not once, not on the floor, not at cot call, and when Ida told him to take it off he said no.

He stopped taking the Cordial. Ida came down the row and he shook his head, and she said, "You'll go out," and he said, "Yes," and did not take it, and did not take it the next time either.

He walked on her right and would not swap.

And he stopped telling her anything new. That was the one she should have seen, because it was the only thing in six weeks he had ever been reliable about. For thirty hours he did not start a single story. He talked — he talked constantly, he talked about the band and the mop and the price of coffee in Constantinople in 1923 — and there was not one king in any of it.

She asked him, on the Sunday morning, why he'd stopped.

"I have not stopped."

"You've stopped."

Bahram walked her past the bandstand.

"There is one left," he said.

"One?"

"There is one story left that matters and it is the largest one and I have been keeping it since the first week." He was looking straight ahead. "I had thought I would give it to you at the end. I have changed my mind. I am going to give it to you tonight and tomorrow, because I do not think it should be the last thing."

"Why not?"

"Because it takes two days to tell," Bahram said, "and I do not know how many I have."

— — —

That afternoon she went into the office and told Doyle Ferrin yes.

It took under a minute. Doyle did not gloat and did not smile and did not shake her hand. He wrote three words in the ledger and said, "Wednesday. Four o'clock, that's hour eleven hundred, I'll put it on the bills tomorrow," and then he said something she thought about a great deal afterward.

"You want my advice?"

"No."

"Tell the Sheik."

Alma stood in the doorway.

"Why."

"Because I've run ninety of these," Doyle said, "and the thing that busts a couple at the end ain't the feet." He shut the ledger. "It's one of 'em carrying something the other one don't know about. Every time. Ninety contests."

"You'd know."

"I would know," Doyle agreed, entirely without irony, and reached for the telephone.

21. WHAT HE DIDN'T SAY

"There was a man," Bahram said, "and he was the strongest man who ever lived, and he was the one I told you about at the horses."

"Rostam."

"Rostam." He took her hands and squared her up the way he did when it was going to be a long one. "And one day he went hunting on the border, alone, and he ate too much and he fell asleep under a tree, and while he was asleep some men stole his horse."

"The horse he spent years finding."

"The horse he spent years finding. Yes. Good." He turned her. "So he walked. He was too proud to go home without it, so he walked into the country on the other side of the border — the enemy country, the one they had been fighting for two hundred years — and he came to a city, and he went in and said who he was."

"And they didn't kill him?"

"They gave him a feast," Bahram said. "That is the part you have to understand about this poem or nothing in it makes sense. The king of the enemy country knew exactly who he was and put him at the head of the table and gave him wine, because you do not kill a guest, not even that guest, and because Rostam was famous everywhere and being able to say he had eaten in your house was worth more than his life."

— — —

"And that night the king's daughter came to his room."

"Oh," Alma said.

"Her name was Tahmineh. And she came in and stood there and told him the truth, which is that she had heard about him her entire life, that men had been telling stories about him in her father's hall since she was small, and that she had decided as a girl that if she ever had a child it would be his." He steered them past the stage. "She did not flirt. She did not pretend to be lost in the corridor. She came in and said: I want a child from you and then you may go."

"And he — "

"He said yes," Bahram said. "He sent for a priest that night and they were married before morning, because he was not a man who would do it otherwise. I want that in the record too. They were married."

"How long did he stay?"

Bahram walked her three steps.

"One night," he said.

— — —

"In the morning he took off his arm-band — a thing he wore, a clasp, and it was known, everybody in the world knew that band — and he gave it to her and he said: if it is a girl, put this in her hair. If it is a boy, put it on his arm."

"And then he left."

"They found his horse the next day and he left." Bahram's voice had not changed at all. "And he went home, and he did not send for her, and he did not go back, and in nine months she had a son and she called him Sohrab, and she put the band on his arm."

The band was four men. Fitz was playing something with a lot of air in it.

"Did she write to him?"

"She wrote to him."

"Did he write back?"

"He sent money," Bahram said, "and gifts, and he sent word that he was pleased. He was not a monster. He was a man with a country to defend on the other side of a war and a child in the enemy's house and he did what men do, which is that he meant to go, every year, and then it was another year."

Alma had her head down on his shoulder.

"So the boy grew up without him," she said.

"The boy grew up enormous." And there was, for one moment, something that was almost joy in his voice. "That is the thing about Sohrab. He is his father's son in every particular. At ten he could beat any man in the city. At twelve nobody would fight him. He was the biggest thing anyone there had ever seen and he had never once been told who his father was, because his mother was frightened."

"Frightened of what?"

"That Rostam would send for him. That she would lose him." He turned her under his arm. "And that her own father would kill the boy if he found out whose he was. Both. Every day, both."

"Did he ask?"

"He asked constantly," Bahram said. "He asked from the time he could speak. Who am I. Why am I bigger than everybody. Where is my father. And she told him nothing for fourteen years, and then one day he came and stood in front of her and would not leave, and she told him."

— — —

"And what did he do?"

Bahram walked her a long way before he answered, right around the outside of the floor, past the bleachers and the fire door and the bandstand and the fourteen other couples moving in the dark.

"He raised an army," he said.

"To fight him?"

"To find him." He said it with a force she had not heard from him in six weeks. "That is the whole tragedy and it is right there in the middle of it and everybody misses it. He did not go to fight his father. He went to war against his father's country in order to locate his father. Because he was seventeen and enormous and he had been told a name, and the only thing he could think of that would bring a man like that out of a place like that was an invasion."

"That's insane."

"He was seventeen," Bahram said. "You are trying to solve the largest problem of your life with the only tool you have. And the only tool he had was that he was the strongest boy on earth."

Alma lifted her head off his shoulder.

"And the plan was — "

"The plan was very simple and it very nearly worked. He would break the border. Rostam would be sent for, because Rostam was always sent for. They would meet. And he would say: I am your son. And then, he thought — this is in the poem, he says it out loud to his mother before he goes — then the two of them together would be so strong that they could put whoever they liked on both thrones and there would never be a war again."

"Oh God."

"Yes."

"Barney — "

"That is where I am stopping," Bahram said.

— — —

"You can't stop there."

"I am stopping there."

"Barney."

"Tomorrow." He was walking her toward the gap in the bleachers because the horn was forty seconds out; she could feel it coming through the floor. "I told you it takes two days."

"Just tell me — " she had hold of his shirt again " — just tell me whether the boy finds him."

Bahram stopped at the gap.

He looked down at her for what was probably two seconds and was certainly not longer, and there was something on his face that she had never seen there before and did not see again until Wednesday afternoon.

"He finds him," he said.

The horn went off.

22. SOHRAB

He told it on the Monday night and he told it badly.

That was the thing she came back to. Six weeks of a man who put a sentence down like a full cup, and on the seventh of November 1932, from about eleven at night until nearly four in the morning, he told her the largest story he had and he could not do it. He stopped in the middle of it. He went back and did pieces again. Twice he lost the thread entirely and stood there with his mouth working and she had to say the tent, you were at the tent, and he said, "Yes. The tent."

She thought it was the Cordial coming out of him. He had not taken it in three days.

— — —

"They met on the field," he said. "There is a fortress on the border and the boy took it in an afternoon, and the king sent for Rostam, and Rostam came — late, drunk, four days late, because he had been sent for a hundred times and it had never once mattered."

"Did he know who he was fighting?"

"Nobody knew. The boy was seventeen and no one had heard of him. He was simply the largest man anybody had seen since Rostam."

"Did the boy know?"

"The boy suspected the whole time," Bahram said. "That is the first thing. Sohrab looks across at this man and something goes through him and he asks. He asks him directly, in front of both armies. He says: I think you are Rostam."

Alma had stopped walking properly and he corrected her with his knee.

"And?"

"And Rostam said no."

"He lied?"

"He said, I am not Rostam. I am a servant of Rostam's." Bahram's voice had gone flat. "And there is a reason for it and it is a good reason and it is the worst thing in the poem. He is old. He is the most famous man alive. And a boy he has never heard of has just taken a fortress in an afternoon, and Rostam looks at him and thinks: if this is the one who finally beats me, then let it be a nobody who beats a nobody. Let there not be a song about the day Rostam went down."

"He lied about his own name to save his reputation."

"He lied about his own name," Bahram said, "because he could not bear to be seen losing. Yes. And every single thing that comes after is that one sentence."

— — —

"They fought three times."

"Three?"

"Three days." He turned her at the corner. "The first day they broke every weapon they had. Spears, swords, clubs, all of it, and the horses gave out and neither of them could stand and they agreed to stop and come back in the morning. And that night the boy went back to his own tent and said to his people — I am quoting it — he said: he is like me. When I look at him something turns over in me. I think this is my father."

"And they told him no."

"They told him no." Bahram was quiet for a moment. "A man in his own camp who knew the truth and had been sent along by the king specifically to prevent this, and he said: no, boy, I have seen Rostam and that is not him. And Sohrab believed him. Because he was seventeen and he wanted to be told what to do."

"On the second day — "

"On the second day the boy won."

Alma looked up.

"He threw him," Bahram said. "The strongest man who ever lived, on his back in the dirt in front of two armies, and Sohrab had a knife out and was on his chest. Seventeen years old. And Rostam said — " he stopped. "He said: it is not our custom. It is our custom to let a man up the first time and take his head the second. And it is not true, there is no such custom, he made it up on the ground with a knife over him."

"And the boy let him up."

"The boy let him up."

They went around the corner by the fire door. There were four people in the bleachers.

"Why?"

"Because he was decent," Bahram said. "Because he was seventeen and decent and he wanted to be the kind of man his father would have been proud of, and he had no idea he was doing it in front of him."

— — —

"The third day."

"The third day he killed him."

Bahram said it and kept walking and Alma had to make herself keep her feet going.

"They wrestled from morning. And Rostam got him — got a grip, got him over, and had the knife in him before the boy hit the ground, and it was fast, and it was over."

"And then — "

"And then the boy said a thing while he was dying." He walked four steps. "He said: this is my own fault and nobody else's. I came here to find my father and I have been asking for him all my life and now I am dying in a strange country and I never saw his face. And then he said: do not think you are safe. My father will hear of this. Whatever hole you go into, he will find you."

"Oh God."

"And Rostam laughed," Bahram said. "He laughed. And he asked him, to be kind to a dying boy, he asked: who is your father, then? Tell me his name.

"And the boy said the name.

"And Rostam went down on the ground."

— — —

The band had stopped. Fitz had gone. There was a phonograph playing at the back of the hall on a low table, some old thing, and it was hissing more than it was playing.

"He tore the shirt off him," Bahram said, "looking for the arm-band. And it was there. On his arm. Exactly where his mother had put it seventeen years before, exactly where he had told her to put it, the day he left."

Alma was crying. She had not decided to.

"He tried everything," Bahram said. "There is a medicine — there is a thing the king has, and it heals anything, and Rostam sent a man to the king begging for it, and the king would not send it. Because if the boy lived, the two of them together would be stronger than any throne on earth, and the king knew it." He turned her under his arm, slowly, the Jamshid turn, the one that cost her nothing. "And Rostam sat there holding him and the boy died before the man got back, and he would have died anyway, because the king was never going to send it."

"That's the end?"

"That is the end. He burned his own tents and he cut his horse's tail and he went home and he lived another two hundred years and there is not one line in the rest of it about him being happy."

— — —

They walked in silence for a long time.

"Why did you keep that one for last?" Alma said.

Bahram did not answer.

"Barney."

"Because it is the best one," he said.

"That's not why."

"No."

She waited. She waited a full circuit of the floor, and past the bandstand, and around again.

"Ask me the question you want to ask," he said at last, "and I will answer it, and it is the only one you will get."

Alma thought about it for a long time. She had it. She had it right there — who are you in that story — and she stood on a collapsed arch at four in the morning on the eighth of November 1932 with a man's arms around her and she was so tired that her mind put its hand on the wrong thing.

"Did Rostam ever tell anybody?" she said. "Afterward. Did he ever tell them what he'd done?"

Bahram walked her all the way around.

"No," he said. "He said the boy was a stranger."

And Alma said, "That's the saddest thing I ever heard," and put her head down on his shoulder, and went out for about ninety seconds, and came back up in a different corner of the room with his voice still going and no memory at all of what he had been saying while she was under.

23. TWO BITS AT THE DOOR

The handbills came off a press in River Rouge on the Monday afternoon and by Tuesday morning they were in every window in three towns.

WEDNESDAY 4 P.M. — HOUR 1100

SHE BURIED HER BABY IN JULY

AND SHE WANTS HER BACK

SEE IT HAPPEN ON THE FLOOR

25¢ — DOYLE FERRIN PRESENTS

Ida brought one in and put it on the cot without a word and went out again.

Alma read it four times.

Buried. He had left it in. She had told him the truth in that office with the blind half down, she had sat in a chair while he laid her own signature on the desk in front of her, and he had gone out and printed buried on eight hundred handbills, and it took her a full minute to work out why.

Because surrendered did not sell.

Because a woman whose child died was a woman the crowd could weep for, and a woman who had signed her daughter over to the county in July because she could not feed her was a woman the crowd would have to decide about, and Doyle Ferrin had never in ninety contests given a crowd anything to decide.

— — —

"Take it back."

"Can't. They're up."

"Then print another one."

"Sweetheart." Doyle had his coat on; he was going somewhere. "I got two hundred bills in windows from here to Wyandotte and a man in Toledo owed money and it's Tuesday. What do you want me to do, go around with a bucket of paste?"

"It says buried."

"It says something people'll pay for."

"It's a lie."

Doyle stopped in the doorway and turned around and for the first time in six weeks he looked at her with something other than professional warmth, and what was underneath it was not cruelty either, and that was the part she could never afterward explain to anybody.

It was patience.

"Alma," he said, "you told me that at the table. On the twenty-fourth of September." He put his hat on. "I wrote down what you said. All I ever did was print it."

— — —

She did not tell Bahram.

She had four separate opportunities in the day that followed and she took none of them and she knew exactly what she was doing every time.

He would have seen a bill. That was the thing she kept in front of herself, the way you keep a hand in front of a candle. Everybody had seen one. They were in the window of the diner on the corner and in the drugstore and pasted to the fire door of the Rialto itself. He had been out of the building on Saturday and the bills went up on Monday, but there were fourteen couples in that hall and every one of them had one, and Chick had brought three back from a cigar store and left them around like a man leaving bait.

So he knew. He must know. And he had not said one word about it in twenty hours, and she told herself that meant he was letting her keep it, the way he had let her keep everything else.

That was the arithmetic she did on the eighth of November 1932 and it was the worst arithmetic she ever did in her life.

— — —

The verse went up on the Tuesday.

Doyle wrote it on the corner of the bandstand in pencil the way he wrote all of them and handed it down to Fitz, and Fitz looked at it for a second and then looked up at Doyle, and Doyle said, "Play it," and Fitz played it.

*The Persian prince and the girl in black,
She buried her baby and she wants her back,
Two bits at the door — come see her get it back.
So hold me up till the horn.*

There were three hundred people in the hall and about a third of them already knew the tune, because the tune was six weeks old and had been in every kitchen in Ecorse since the middle of October.

By the second time through, they were singing it.

Alma Sutter danced in a circle on a maple floor with a man's arms around her while three hundred people sang a song about her dead daughter, who was not dead, and she looked at the floor going by under her feet and thought, with a clarity she never had again about anything:

I did this. Nobody did this to me. I signed the paper in July and I lied at the table in September and I said yes on Sunday, and everything since has just been machinery.

She got through it. She did the seven. Lion, desert, dragon, witch, reeds, giant, div, and back to the top.

— — —

Bahram did not say anything about the verse.

He did something else. On the fourth time through, when the whole hall had it and the drummer had come in behind it, he stopped them dead in the middle of the floor — both feet, one count, the witch, the only still thing in the seven — and he put his hand flat on the back of her head and held it there against his shoulder so that she was facing into his shirt and not into the room.

He held it there for the whole verse. Eleven seconds, maybe twelve.

A judge started over and thought better of it.

And when the band went into the next thing he took his hand away and put it back on her waist and walked her on and said, in an ordinary voice, as though continuing a conversation about nothing:

"There were nine hundred people here on Saturday and there will be twelve hundred tomorrow and none of them will be able to tell you one true thing about either of us. That is not a small thing to have. Most people do not get it. Keep hold of it."

Alma said, "Barney — "

"I know," he said.

She had not said anything yet.

"I know," he said again. "It is all right."

And she believed, for the next nineteen hours, that he was telling her he had seen the handbill and forgiven her for it.

IV. THE GRIND

24. THE ARGONNE FOREST

The last event Doyle Ferrin ever ran at the Rialto was called the Argonne Forest and it went on from midnight until twenty past three in the morning on the ninth of November 1932.

He had been saving it. It was a Sunday event in the program he ran in other towns and he had never used it in Ecorse because he had never needed it, and on election night, with the hall down to a hundred and ten people and a radio going behind the bandstand, he needed it.

The rules were that the men carried the women.

That was all. That was the whole event. The seven men picked up the seven women and carried them, and they kept walking, and every twenty minutes a judge blew a whistle and any man who had put his partner down since the last whistle was out.

It was named for the battle because Doyle had a poster.

— — —

The radio came on at eight and by ten it was over and everybody in the building knew it.

Alma heard the numbers the way you hear weather. Pennsylvania. Ohio. Michigan, which went, and the hundred and ten people in that hall made a sound at Michigan that was not quite a cheer — it was lower than a cheer, it went on longer — and a man near the fire door put both hands over his face and sat down.

Roosevelt had it by midnight. He had forty-two states before it was finished.

And Alma Sutter, twenty-nine years old, of Harlan County, Kentucky, and Beaufait Street, Detroit, who had not read a newspaper since the twenty-fourth of September and had no address to be registered at and had not voted, was in the middle of a maple floor being carried by a Persian who could not vote at all.

"Are you glad?" she said. It was the first thing she'd said in an hour.

Bahram shifted her weight.

"I do not know what it means," he said. "I have been here eight years. In 1928 they said everything would change and it changed into this."

"But are you glad."

He walked eleven or twelve steps.

"There is a thing at the end of the poem," he said. "After everything. After six hundred years of kings. The Arabs come over the border and it is finished, all of it, the whole world of the book, and the poet writes a letter from a general on the losing side to his brother, and the general says: I see what is coming and there is nothing to be done, and men who have nothing will be raised up, and men who have everything will be brought down, and the world will be turned over." He shifted her again. "And it is not a hopeful letter and it is not a despairing one. It is a man saying: it is going to be different and I will not be able to tell you whether it was better, because I will be dead."

"That's not an answer."

"No," Bahram agreed. "I am glad. I am glad because a hundred and ten people in this room made that noise when they said Michigan, and I have not heard anybody in this country make that noise in four years."

— — —

At eleven o'clock, before the Argonne started, Doyle Ferrin stood on the edge of the maple with the microphone and said, "Folks, I got a new one," and handed a cigarette paper down to Fitz.

It was not a verse. It was the bridge — the part in the middle of a song where the tune goes somewhere else and then comes home — and it was the only bridge that song ever had, and he had been sitting on it since Sandusky.

Fitz played it slow, and the hundred and ten people who had stayed in that hall on election night instead of going home to a radio learned it in one pass:

*Oh, they never say stop and they never say when,
They just count the hours and they count them again,
And the only three words in the American tongue
Are hold me up —
Hold me up till the horn.*

— — —

Three couples went out in the Argonne Forest.

A man from Melvindale went down at half past one with his partner still in his arms and did not let go of her when he hit the maple, and Doyle gave them a beautiful send-off.

Chick Mullaly carried Dot for three hours and twenty minutes without setting her down once, and at the end of it he was walking like a man in water, and Dot was asleep with her face in his neck, and Alma watched them go by and thought about a boarding house that was never going to exist.

Bahram carried her for the whole of it.

He was thirty years old and he had lost twenty-two pounds since September and he had not taken the Cordial in five days, and he carried a woman for three hours and twenty minutes on the ninth of November 1932 and did not put her down.

She said, once, around two in the morning: "Put me down."

"No."

"Barney, they'll — they'll let you set me down and pick me up, that's not the rule, the rule is — "

"I know the rule."

"Then put me down."

"I am not going to put you down," Bahram said, "because I am not going to be able to pick you up again, and I would rather not find that out tonight in front of these people."

— — —

At twenty past three Doyle called it and there were seven couples left.

Seven. Nine days short of the eighteenth. Doyle stood on the bandstand under one work lamp and looked out at a hall with about sixty people in it and did the arithmetic in public.

"All right," he said. "Here's where we are. Hour eleven hundred is this afternoon at four o'clock, and that's the finish. I can't run this into next week and I'm not going to stand here and pretend otherwise."

Somebody said, "The finish?"

"The finish. Whatever's standing at four o'clock splits the thousand." He rubbed his face. "But I ain't splitting it seven ways. Seven ways is a hundred and forty apiece and that's an insult to everybody in this room, including me."

Nobody said anything at all.

"So we'll grind in the morning," Doyle said. "Six o'clock, straight through, till there's four left." He put the microphone down on the piano. "Go on. Get your fifteen. There's nobody left to watch you."

— — —

They lay in the parts department at four in the morning with the horn off and the hall empty and the phonograph still going somewhere out there because nobody had gone to stop it.

Two hundred and fifty dollars.

Alma lay on the cot and did the sum, assuming four and assuming she was one of them. Two hundred and fifty dollars was fifteen months at the county home, and she was not going to need fifteen months, because that afternoon at four o'clock Doyle Ferrin was going to bring her daughter out onto that floor and hand her over in front of twelve hundred people and the silver would come down and it would be over.

Two hundred and fifty dollars and whatever the crowd threw.

She would take the room on Beaufait Street back. She would have Ruth by Thursday.

She fell asleep, at last, properly, for the first time in forty-six days, in the fifteen minutes before the horn — and it was the horn that woke her, and it went through her chest like a hand, and she got up on a foot that had been flat for twenty-five days and went out to be ground down.

25. NO PIN, NO PINCH

The grind started at six in the morning on Wednesday the ninth of November, ten hours before the end of everything, and Doyle announced the rules himself, on the floor, without the microphone.

“Seven couples and I need four by four o’clock. That’s the whole of it.” He looked down the line. “So. No rest. No fifteens. Horn’s off. You’ll eat on the floor and you’ll go on the floor and you’ll stay on the floor till there’s four.

“And no helping. That’s the part you’ll hate. No pinching, no pins, no slapping, no shaking, and — ” he paused “ — no talking.”

Somebody said, “What?”

“No talking,” Doyle said. “Not to your partner, not to anybody. Judges’ll call it. I know what you’ve been doing out there for six weeks and it’s the only reason half of you are still standing, and today it stops.”

— — —

Alma turned and looked at Bahram and Bahram was already looking at the ceiling.

“He is not stupid,” he said. It was the last thing either of them said out loud for nine hours. “He has been watching us since the twelfth day and he has finally worked out what the thing is that keeps you up.”

Then a judge came past and put a finger up and that was that.

— — —

The first hour was fine.

The second was fine.

By the fourth she understood what had been taken and it was not conversation.

It was that for six weeks she had been going under a hundred times a day — ten seconds, forty seconds, two minutes — and every single time she had come back up into the middle of a sentence. There had always been a voice already running. She had never once, in six weeks, surfaced into silence.

Now she surfaced into a room with fifty people in it and a phonograph and the sound of thirteen other couples' shoes on maple, and there was nothing to come back to, and each time it got harder to want to.

By the sixth hour she was going under and staying under and being walked, and she knew it was happening and could not do anything about it, and somewhere far off she could hear herself making a small noise on the exhale, over and over, like a hinge.

— — —

And then he started to dance it.

She never afterward knew what hour it was. Late morning. The light through the soaped windows had gone white.

She came up out of one of the long ones and her feet were doing something and she did not know what and then she did.

Out, under, around.

Jamshid. The king who stood up in front of everybody and said I made all of this myself, and lost it, and ran for a hundred years.

He was not saying it. His mouth was shut. He was putting her through the figure with his hands, and her body was going where it had gone thirty times an hour for three weeks, and the story came up in her without one word being spoken.

He gave her the lion. She dropped and he took it and gave it back.

He gave her the desert — the long slow sideways trail, four counts, and she thought about a man following a ram because a ram must be going somewhere.

He gave her the witch. Dead stop, both feet, one count. A man saved by a habit he had not thought about.

And then he took her right around, six counts, all the way, her weight coming off the bad foot three separate times inside the circle, and she came out of it upright and awake with her eyes streaming and a judge four feet away who had seen absolutely nothing at all.

She looked up at him.

He looked back at her and did not move his face in any way whatsoever.

He kept it up for five hours. All seven, in order, over and over, in silence, on the last morning of it, in a room where talking had been made against the rules.

— — —

Doyle called it at one in the afternoon and by then there were four couples.

The Wyandotte girl had gone at ten. Chick and Dot were still up — Chick had carried Dot the last two hours the way a man carries a sack, openly, and no judge had touched him, and Alma understood by then that there were rules and there was Chick Mullaly and the two things had never met.

Doyle got up on the bandstand and said, "That's four," and turned the horn back on, and the whole floor made a noise.

Fifteen minutes.

They lay down in the parts department and Alma looked at the ceiling boards and could not make her hands stop.

Through the canvas, on the men's side, Bahram said the first words he had said in nine hours.

"Alma."

"Yes."

"That was the last one."

"The last what?"

"There is nothing left in the book that you do not have," he said. "I have been going through it for four days. There are eight hundred kings I have not told you about and there is not one of them that is any use to you." She heard him turn over. "You have all of it. You have everything I brought."

She lay in the dark with her hands going.

"Barney," she said. "This afternoon at four — "

"I know about this afternoon."

"You've seen the bill."

There was a pause that she took, at the time, for exhaustion.

"Yes," Bahram said.

26. A DOLLAR AND A HOT MEAL

They started coming in at one in the afternoon, three hours early, and by half past two the Rialto was as full as it had ever been.

Alma counted the bleachers the way she had counted them on the first night and could not finish. Doyle put the number at fourteen hundred to the Free Press and Ida said afterward it was nearer sixteen and that people were standing three deep behind the north rail and that a man from the fire department had come and looked at it and gone away again.

They had come out on a Wednesday afternoon, the day after the election, in the fourth year of the worst thing that had ever happened to any of them.

There was a photographer.

He came at two with a Speed Graphic and a case of flashbulbs and he set up on a chair at the edge of the maple and Doyle showed him where to stand.

— — —

She did not see the girl arrive.

She was on the floor. She had been on the floor since four in the morning and there were four couples on it and the crowd was

singing, and the stage door was around behind the bandstand at the far end past the parts department, and she did not see it and she never once, for the rest of her life, stopped being grateful for that.

Ida saw it. Fitz saw it. Chick Mullaly saw it and said nothing to anybody for eleven years and then said it to a man in a bar in Sandusky in 1943, which was how it got out at all.

Doyle had sent a man out to Northville on the Monday to fetch the child, the way he had sent a man out in October to find the papers, and the man had come back on the Monday evening and gone into the office and shut the door. Ida did not hear what was said in there. What she knew was that the bills stayed up in every window in three towns, and that on the Tuesday Doyle spent an hour on the telephone, and that on the Wednesday a different woman altogether came to the stage door.

She came at twenty past two with a little girl of about four in a coat too big for her. Doyle came out and talked to the woman for two or three minutes and gave her something, and Ida, who was standing eleven feet away with a tray of bottles, saw that it was a dollar bill and heard Doyle say that there'd be a plate for the both of them after and that they should wait in the parts department and keep the coat on her because the coat was fine, the coat was good, leave the coat.

The girl had brown hair. That was all Ida could ever tell her.

Brown hair, and she was small for four, and she was very good about waiting.

— — —

Bahram was walking her in slow circles and had been since noon and had said almost nothing all day.

At three o'clock he said: "What time."

"Four."

"And what will you do afterward."

"Take the room back," Alma said. "Beaufait Street. It's eleven dollars a month and the woman's still got it. I'll have her home by Thursday."

He walked her four or five steps.

"And after that?"

"I don't know. Something." She was so tired that everything came out flat. "The laundry might take me back in the spring. Or there's the — you know they're saying there'll be work now. Everybody's saying it."

"Yes," Bahram said. "Everybody is saying it."

"What'll you do?"

"West," he said.

"West where?"

"I do not know. West." He turned them at the corner. "There is nothing here. There has never been anything here. There is a man in Chicago who is my father and there is a job at a plant that will not exist in three years and there is a room on Fort Street with my bag in it." He said it without any self-pity whatsoever. "Two hundred and fifty dollars will take a man a very long way west."

Alma stopped.

"Say that again."

"There is a man in Chicago who is my father," Bahram said.

The crowd was singing. The band was six men again; Doyle had hired the other two back for the afternoon.

"You found him."

"In 1929."

"You found him and you never — " Her mind would not do it. "Barney, you've had six weeks — "

"I know."

"What did he say?"

And Bahram Nasseri, thirty years old, of Tabriz and Constantinople and the River Rouge, looked out over the heads of sixteen hundred people in a converted automobile showroom in Ecorse, Michigan, forty minutes before the end of it, and said:

"He said, can I help you?"

— — —

She waited.

"That is all," he said. "That is the entire story and I have been carrying it since the third night and there is nothing else in it. I stood in a shop on Halsted Street with rugs on the walls and a man came out from the back who was sixty-one years old and had my hands, and he said can I help you, in English, and I said no."

"You said no?"

"I said no, thank you. I said I was looking for a different address." Bahram was walking her again; she had not noticed him start. "And he said, what address, and he was kind about it — he was very kind, he came out from behind the counter to look at the paper I did not have — and I said the name of a street I made up, and he said he did not know it, and I said thank you, and I went out, and there is a bell on that door and I heard it ring behind me."

"Why?"

"That is the question."

"Why?"

He walked her a long way. Past the bandstand and the fire door and around.

"Because he did not know me," Bahram said, "and if I had told him, he would have had to decide something. And he was sixty-one and he had a shop. And I stood on Halsted Street in the cold for about two hours afterward working out what I had done, and what I worked out is this — " and here his voice went, for the only time in six weeks, and he took it back inside four seconds " — I did not do it for him. I have said for three years that I did it for him. I did it because as long as I did not say it, he had not chosen. Do you

understand? The moment I say I am your son, he has to choose, and then I will know. And I have been able to go on not knowing for three years and it has been the only comfortable thing in my life."

Alma was crying.

"That is Sohrab," Bahram said. "You asked me on Monday who I was in that story and you asked me the wrong question because you were tired, and I let you, and I should not have. I am not the man who kills the boy. I am the boy who stands in front of him and does not say the name."

— — —

The band stopped.

Doyle Ferrin came out onto the maple with the microphone and the house came up on its feet, all sixteen hundred of them, and the photographer put a bulb in.

"Folks," Doyle said. "Hour eleven hundred."

Bahram took both her hands.

"Alma," he said. "Look at me."

She looked at him.

"Whatever happens in the next four minutes," he said, "I want you to know that I have never once lied to you in this building. Not one time. There are things I have not said. There is not one thing I have said that was not true."

"Barney, what — "

"Say my name."

"What?"

"Please," he said. "Say it properly. Once."

And she said it.

He shut his eyes for about a second.

"Thank you," he said. "That is the second time in eight years."

And then Sonny came up the ladder at the back of the stage, and took down the numerals, and hung up eleven hundred, and the crowd started to count.

27. THE SPOTLIGHT

Doyle took his time, because he was good at his trade and it was the last four minutes of it he would ever do in that town.

He walked the four couples out to the middle and lined them up and had the crowd give each of them a hand. He said their numbers. He said where they were from. He held up the thousand dollars in an envelope and let sixteen hundred people look at it.

Then he said, "Now. Before we finish."

And the hall went quiet, because they had all seen the bills, and they knew what was coming, and they had paid a quarter for it.

— — —

"There's a girl on this floor," Doyle said, "come in here on the twenty-fourth of September with a coat buttoned up to here and sixty cents in it."

Alma stood in the light with her hands at her sides.

"Number sixty-three. Alma Sutter. And I'll tell you what she told me at that table, because she told it to me straight and she didn't cry when she said it, and I have thought about that woman every day for six weeks."

The photographer had come out onto the maple.

"She lost her little girl in July," Doyle said. "Four years old."

Somewhere in the bleachers a woman said, "Oh, no," out loud.

"And she come in here and she danced eleven hundred hours on a broke foot." Doyle let it sit, exactly as long as it needed. "Well, folks. I got something to tell you and it ain't in the papers and it ain't on the bill outside, and I want you to hear it from me."

He turned around.

"Bring her out," he said.

— — —

The stage door opened at the far end past the bandstand and Ida Teller came out onto the maple holding the hand of a little girl in a coat too big for her.

Sixteen hundred people made a sound Alma had never heard before and never heard again.

She did not move.

That was the thing. She stood in the cone of the spotlight in a green dress on a floor she had been on for forty-six days and she did not move one inch, because the room had tilted again, fifteen degrees, the way it had on the second of November, and there was a rim of green light around everything, and there was a bird in the girders with its wings out over the whole building, and she had known for twenty-five days that none of that was real.

So she stood there and waited to find out.

The girl came across the floor.

She came slowly, because it is a very long way for a four-year-old, and because Ida was walking slowly, and because she had been told to. She had brown hair. She was small. She was holding the front of her coat with one hand the way a child does when the coat is too big.

And Alma Sutter went down on her knees on the maple in front of sixteen hundred people, which was a disqualification, and no judge in that building moved a muscle, and she put her arms out.

— — —

The flashbulb went off.

That was the photograph. It ran on the front page of the Detroit Free Press on the tenth of November 1932 under the headline A MOTHER'S ELEVEN HUNDRED HOURS, and it was reprinted in nineteen papers that month, and it was in a book about the

Depression in 1970 and in a documentary film in 1979, and it is the only image of any of it that survives.

A woman on her knees in a spotlight in a torn green dress with the number 63 on her back.

A small girl in a coat, half-turned, one hand in the coat front.

The woman's face.

— — —

Here is what Alma could remember, and she remembered all of it, every hour of the rest of her life, in perfect order, at any time she wanted it and a great many times when she did not.

The coat smelled of somebody else's house.

The girl's hair was finer than Ruth's and there was more of it.

The girl said, "Are you the lady?"

And Alma said, "Yes."

And the girl put both arms around her neck, because she had been told to do that, because a man had given her mother a dollar and said there'd be a plate for the both of them after, and because she was four years old and a woman was on her knees in front of her crying, and a child will hold anything that is crying.

Alma held her.

She held her for eleven seconds and she did not know. She was six weeks without sleep, on a bottle that made the floor tilt, in a cone of white light, in front of sixteen hundred people who were on their feet and weeping, and she held a child she had not seen since the eleventh of July, and she did not know.

And then the silver started.

It came down out of the bleachers all around them, hundreds of coins, a noise like hail on a tin roof, rolling and ringing on the maple in the dark beyond the light, and the band was playing, and

sixteen hundred people were singing the only three words in the American tongue.

— — —

Bahram was eleven feet away with a death certificate in the pocket of a coat he had not taken off in four days.

He had four seconds.

Alma did not see him make the decision because she was on her knees with her face in a stranger's daughter's hair. Nobody saw it. There is no witness to the four seconds and there never was one, and every single thing that happened afterward — the rest of her life, and his, and the letter and the package and the room in Dearborn — comes out of four seconds that nobody in that building was looking at.

What she heard was the crowd change.

That was all. A sound of sixteen hundred people going ah — a different ah, the wrong one — and she came up out of the child's hair and turned around.

He was already down.

— — —

He had gone over onto his right side with his right arm out and his left hand up near his chest, and his knees were drawn up, and his head had gone back.

She knew that shape.

She had seen it eleven or twelve times a night for three weeks, in the rafters, in the green rim around the lights, on the tilted floor at three in the morning: a boy on the ground in a strange country with a knife in him, telling a stranger that his father would come.

She was the only person in a hall of sixteen hundred people who knew what she was looking at, and she knew it because of a story

he had told her on a Monday night, and she got to him on her hands and knees across a floor covered in coins.

— — —

"Barney — "

He was breathing. His eyes were open.

"Barney, get up, you have to — " she had his shirt in both hands " — it's four o'clock, it's four o'clock, we made it, you have to get up — "

And Bahram Nasserri looked up at her from the maple floor of the Rialto with the whole weight of a spotlight on both of them and said:

"No."

"What?"

"Alma." His hand came up and closed around her wrist. "It is done. It is finished. You are off the floor and nobody can say you stepped off it."

She did not understand. She did not understand for a very long time.

"They'll disqualify us — "

"Yes."

"You dropped — "

"Yes," he said.

And then a judge blew a whistle, and Doyle Ferrin said something into the microphone that she did not hear, and men came out onto the floor, and somebody took the little girl's hand and led her away toward the stage door in the confusion, and Alma Sutter never saw that child again and did not learn her name.

CODA

28. ELEVEN HUNDRED HOURS

Doyle Ferrin split the thousand dollars four ways and paid it in cash at the door on the evening of the ninth of November 1932, disqualification or no disqualification, and told the Free Press he'd done it, and it was the last decent thing he ever did in that town and it cost him nothing at all.

Two hundred and fifty dollars.

Alma took it because she had two hundred and fifty dollars' worth of reasons to take it and because a woman came out of the bleachers and put a further forty-one dollars and sixty cents in her hands in a cigar box, swept up off the maple.

She went out to Northville on the Thursday morning, the tenth of November, on the streetcar as far as it goes and then the walk.

There was a woman at a desk who was kind about it. They were all kind about it.

— — —

Ruth Ann Sutter died on the fifteenth of October 1932 of diphtheria at the Wayne County home, at four years and five months, and the notification had gone out by post on the seventeenth to the last address on the file, which was a rooming house on Beaufait Street that her mother had given up on the twenty-third of September.

The letter came back. It sat in a dead-letter box in the post office on Fort Street, eleven blocks from the Rialto, for the whole of the contest.

She had danced through the night it happened. She had been asleep under a spotlight on an iron cot, on the fifteenth of October, at midnight, and Sonny had hung the five and the double naught that afternoon and Doyle had made a small ceremony of it and the crowd had counted down from ten.

She had felt nothing.

That was the part. There was nothing to find, and she looked for the rest of her life. She went over that day a thousand times — the eggs at two in the morning, the horse story at four, a couple from

Ypsilanti going out at ten past nine and a man who had seen a bird — and there was nothing in it, and there was never going to be anything in it, and the world had simply gone on being a room with a band in it.

— — —

She went to the Rialto on the Friday and it was a hall let to a man selling tractors.

Ferrin Amusement Co. had loaded out on the Thursday afternoon for Fort Wayne. Ida had gone with them, because Ida always went with them, and she left an address that turned out to be a boarding house that had never heard of her.

Alma asked a man where the Persian had gone and he said which one.

— — —

The rest of it went like this.

She took the room on Beaufait Street back and lived in it for nine years. She never bought a stone, because there is no stone on a county plot and she was told that plainly by a man at a desk who was kind about it, and she never asked a second time.

She got work at the laundry on Vernor in March of 1934 and stayed there until it shut in 1949. She stood at a press for fifteen years on a foot that had come down on the fifteenth of October 1932 and a second one that came down in 1935, and after 1938 she used a stick, and after 1955 she used two.

She did not marry again. Roy Sutter was declared dead in absentia in 1946 at her request and she never found out one thing about what happened to him and stopped wanting to somewhere around 1940.

She was on the front page of the Free Press on the tenth of November 1932 and people recognised her on the streetcar for about five months and then they stopped.

She had the green rim on the lights for the rest of her life.

And she did the seven. Every day, or near enough, holding the edge of a sink or the back of a chair — lion, desert, dragon, witch, reeds, giant, div — and she never told one living soul what any of them were, and there was nobody left alive who could have told them.

— — —

The package came in March of 1943.

Brown paper, string, no letter. Posted from Bakersfield, California, in a hand she knew immediately and had not seen since a cigarette paper on the corner of a bandstand.

Inside was a book.

It was old and it had been rebound badly and it was in a script she could not read, right to left, in a language she did not have one word of. There were pictures in it — flat, gold and blue, no perspective, men on horses with faces like moons — and she sat on the edge of a bed on Beaufait Street with it open on her knees and understood after about a minute what she was holding, and put her hand flat on the page.

Two places were marked with folded paper.

The first was a picture of an enormous bird carrying a white-haired child up a mountain.

The second was near the end. It had no picture. There was a folded sheet in it, and the folded sheet was a certified copy, stamped, of a death certificate issued by the County of Wayne, State of Michigan, for SUTTER, RUTH ANN, and it was dated the fifteenth of October 1932, and it had been applied for and paid for at a county office out past Northville on Saturday the fifth of November 1932 at twenty past two in the afternoon.

He had had it in his coat.

He had had it in his coat for four days. He had had it in his coat on the eighth of November while three hundred people sang a song about her dead daughter and he put his hand flat on the back of her head so that she was facing into his shirt. He had had it in his coat at four o'clock on the ninth of November while she went down on

her knees in a spotlight, eleven feet away, with four seconds to decide.

There was no letter. There was never a letter.

She wrote to Bakersfield in April. The envelope came back in June marked NOT KNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS, and she wrote again in 1944 to the same address anyway, and that one came back too, and she did not write a third time.

— — —

She never told anybody.

That is the fact and it does not have anything underneath it. She had the certificate and the book from March of 1943 until she died and she never showed either of them to another human being, and there was nobody to show them to, because Ruth Ann Sutter had been dead for eleven years and had been dead for two of the six weeks in which sixteen hundred people wept for her mother.

She kept the photograph.

She had it framed in 1951, badly, at a place on Michigan Avenue, and she hung it in the kitchen of a two-room apartment in Dearborn where it stayed for twenty years: a woman on her knees in a torn green dress in a cone of white light, and a small girl in a coat too big for her, half-turned, one hand holding the coat front.

People asked about it. Everybody who ever came into that kitchen asked about it, because it is an extraordinary photograph.

And Alma Sutter would say: that was in the paper. That was a dance marathon in Ecorse in 1932. I was in it for six weeks.

And they would say, is that your little girl?

And she would say yes.

— — —

1971.

She was seventy-one. She had two sticks and an apartment on the second floor and a woman from the county who came Tuesdays.

There was a girl doing a project. She was nineteen or twenty and she was from the university at Ann Arbor and somebody had given her the name, and she came out to Dearborn in October with a tape recorder in a case and sat at the kitchen table and asked about the marathons.

She was very earnest. She had done her reading. She knew about the derbies and the silver showers and she had a photocopy of a handbill.

"They say people went out of their minds," the girl said. "Is that true? Did you hallucinate?"

"I saw a bird," Alma said.

The girl wrote it down.

They talked for about an hour. The girl asked about the food and the cots and the money and whether it was rigged, and Alma told her yes, it was rigged, they always had a couple on the payroll, everybody knew.

And then the girl looked past her at the wall.

"Is that the famous one?"

"That's it."

"God." The girl got up and went over to it. "This is — I've seen this. This is in the Terkel book. This is you."

"That's me."

The girl looked at it for a long moment, the way people did.

"And that's your daughter," she said.

The refrigerator was going. Outside a car went past. It was a Tuesday in October in Dearborn, Michigan, and there was one bare bulb over the sink with a rim of green light standing an inch off it, not quite still, the way there had been since 1932.

Alma Sutter put both hands on the table.

She had thirty-nine years of it. She had a book she could not read on a shelf in the other room with two folded papers in it, and a foot that had come down on the fifteenth of October, and seven figures

she could still do holding the edge of a sink, and four seconds that nobody had been looking at.

And she had never once been able to decide.

That was the whole of it, in the end, and she had gone at it from every side for thirty-nine years — whether he had given her the last good hour of her life or taken the only one that was hers, whether a man who will not say a name is merciful or only frightened, whether she would have chosen it, whether anyone had ever asked her.

She had asked herself the question in 1943 and in 1951 and at three o'clock in the morning more times than she could count, and the answer had never come, and she understood by now that it was not going to.

"Yes," she said. "That's my daughter."

And the girl turned off the tape recorder and thanked her and went back to Ann Arbor, and Alma Sutter sat in her kitchen and looked at a photograph on a wall of a child whose name she never learned.

— — —

In the poem there is a king who is the last good one, and when it is finished — when he has done everything he came to do and there is nothing left that anyone needs him for — he calls the men who love him and tells them to go home, and they will not go, and so he walks out into the mountains in the snow. They follow him. They follow him all day.

And there is a night, and in the night the snow comes, and in the morning there are no tracks at all, and the men stand there in the white looking at the place where he was.

The poem does not say that he died. It is very careful. It says only that he was not found.

GLOSSARY

div DEEV — Persian, *demon*. One of the monstrous beings of Persian myth; the White Div is the seventh and last of Rostam's Seven Trials.

Shahnameh shah-nah-MEH — Persian, *the book of kings*. Ferdowsi's thousand-year-old epic of the Persian kings and heroes — as Bahram puts it, a book full of people who do not recognise each other until it is too late.

Simorgh see-MORGH — Persian, *thirty birds*. The ancient bird of the mountain, older than everything and witness to the world burning three times, who takes the abandoned child Zal and raises him in her nest.

Forty-five minutes dancing. Fifteen minutes on a cot. Around the clock, for as long as a body will hold. Last couple standing takes a thousand dollars, and if one goes down, both go home.

Ecorse, Michigan, September 1932. Ninety-one couples take the floor of a converted automobile showroom while two thousand people pay a quarter a night to watch the poor come apart on schedule. Alma Sutter enters alone. She buried a daughter six weeks ago.

She is paired with a stranger the announcer decides to call Barney, because Bahram is more trouble than it's worth. He needs the money and won't say why. To keep her awake he starts telling her a story a thousand years old — kings who lose everything, a boy raised on a mountain by a bird, a father and a son who meet in single combat without knowing each other's faces. He can't stop moving to tell it, so he teaches it to her as steps.

Eleven hundred hours is forty-six days. They are going to be on that floor for all of it.

"Then you already know the story. I have only been telling you the old version."

