

ROYA
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No. 61

THE ROAD TO SHAAM

The Gharibān



C H E W Z

A Roya Publication

THE ROAD TO SHAAM

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 61

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

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THE PARDEH

the whole of it is on the cloth from the beginning



- a* the roll — everything not yet reached
- b* what is shown — a border, a river, a horse, the shaft of a standard
- c* the back — the paint coming through, present and unreadable
- d* where it hung — the wall unfaded behind it
- e* the stick — set down where the narrator stopped

A painted curtain of the kind carried by wandering narrators, unrolled in coffeehouses and squares and revealed a section at a time. The whole of it is on the cloth from the beginning. The listener is only shown as much as the narrator has reached.

SYNOPSIS

Tehran, the last month of winter. Ali Shabani is fifteen years old, the second son of a secular and comfortable family in the north of the city, and every year for six years he has taken a bus forty minutes south to a walled yard behind a butcher's shop, where he beats himself with a chain until he bleeds through his shirt.

Nobody makes him go. That is the part he has never been able to explain to anyone.

This year he has been given the part of Abbas — the man who reached the river at Karbala, filled a waterskin, and refused to drink because there were children behind him who had none. It is the best part there is. And on the seventh night, in the state that has come over him every Muharram since he was nine, Ali floats out of his body and sees something he has never seen before: an alley, a man on the ground, and men from his own neighbourhood standing over him doing nothing.

The old men tell him he has been shown Karbala. Every land is Karbala.

The alley is three streets from his uncle's door.

Over ten nights, alternating between the yard in south Tehran and the plain in Iraq thirteen hundred years earlier, *The Road to Shaam* tells two stories in strict order — the siege, the thirst, the river, the infant held up to be seen, the survivors marched eight hundred kilometres to Damascus — and a boy discovering that the beat he has been mourning to was set for him, at a specific speed, by people who loved him.

Book One of the Ghariban.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is an age — I would put it at somewhere between fifteen and twenty-four, though it varies and some people never leave it — at which a young man will accept a story as a set of instructions.

Not as a story. Not as a shape somebody made to hold something that has no shape of its own. As instructions. As a map with a legend, drawn to scale, of a country he is actually standing in.

I was that age once and I was extremely good at it. I could take a thing that had been polished by thirteen hundred years of being told in the dark by men who wanted you to weep, and I could hold it up against my own street, my own week, my own small stupid griefs, and find the correspondences. And I found them. That is the thing nobody warns you about. You always find them. A story that has survived that long has survived precisely because it fits everything, and a thing that fits everything is not a key, it is a blindfold with a very beautiful pattern printed on it.

I want to be careful here, because there is a lazy version of this book and I did not want to write it.

The lazy version says the old stories are lies and the people who keep them are fools. That is not true and it is not interesting and anybody who has actually stood in one of those rooms knows it is not true. What happens in those rooms is real. The grief is real, the food is real, the arms around you when your legs go are real, and the thing that happens to a human nervous system after ten nights of no sleep and no food and a fixed beat is so real that it can be measured with a stopwatch and I have put the number in the book.

The danger was never the story.

The danger is the moment a person stops reading it as a story and starts using it as an address.

Everything that goes wrong in this book goes wrong because somebody looked at a thing in front of him — a stain, a boy, an alley, a night, another man's death — and reached for the oldest,

largest, most beautiful explanation available instead of the small ugly one that was true. Every land is Karbala. It is the finest sentence we have. It is also, if you hand it to a frightened child at the wrong moment, a way of making sure he never asks the second question.

I have watched men do this with epics and I have watched men do it with politics and I have watched men do it with their own families, and it is always the same move, and it is always made by somebody who loves you.

The people in these pages are not fanatics. I have no interest in fanatics. They are ordinary, competent, generous people who are extremely serious about something that was never meant to be taken that seriously, and who are, for the most part, kind — and the kindness is the mechanism, not the exception. A cage built by people who do not love you is easy to leave.

I got out of mine late, at some cost, in another country, and I would like to say I did it by being clever. I did not. Somebody paid for the ticket.

The history in this book is accurate. I have checked it more carefully than I have checked most things in my life. The names, the days, the water, the eight hundred kilometres, the woman in the court who would not stop talking — all of that happened, or is believed to have happened by enough people for long enough that the difference has stopped being useful.

What I have added is one boy, one alley, and eleven minutes.

Read the old parts as history. Read the new parts as a warning. And if you find yourself, at any point, noticing how exactly the ancient thing maps onto your own life —

put the book down for a minute. That feeling is the subject.

Chew Z

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PART ONE — BEFORE

1. THE NIGHT — blue

I have let you assume something for a long time and it is time I stopped.

I was not a boy from Nazi Abad [naa-ZEE aa-BAAD].

I want to be exact about this because the exactness is the whole of it. In the year 1382 I lived in a four-bedroom apartment on the eighth floor of a building in **Elahieh [e-laa-hee-YEH]**, in the north of Tehran, with a doorman and an underground car park and a view down the length of the city on the four days a year you could see the length of the city.

My mother taught art history. My father was, and is, an engineer, and put the lifts into the towers that my other grandfather's firm put up. There was a Steinway in that apartment that nobody played. There was wine in the kitchen in a cupboard that did not lock, in a country where that is a serious matter, and it was there because it had always been there and because nobody in my family had ever seriously entertained the idea that anyone would come.

Nobody in that apartment prayed. Not once, not ever, not at a funeral. My grandmother could not have told you which way was Mecca from her own living room and would have found the question amusing.

And in the last days of Zilhajjeh, 1382, on the edge of Muharram [mo-har-RAM], I got on the number 130 with a bag and went forty minutes south to a walled yard behind a butcher's shop and beat myself with a chain until I bled through my shirt.

* * *

Now. Here is my family, so that you understand what I was doing.

My grandfather on my mother's side, **Yousef [yoo-SEF]**, was born in 1309 and founded, out of nothing, a firm that put up a fair fraction of the towers in the north of this city, and was, in the plainest and most complete sense of the word, a Persepolis [per-se-PO-lis] man.

Persepolis — *Perspolis*, as everyone here says it — is one of the two great football clubs of this country. Red. Founded in 1342. And in the south and the centre and the bazaar and in every taxi in this city, red is not a preference, it is a category of person.

My grandfather went to the Azadi [aa-zaa-DEE] stadium for thirty years and did not stop going when his knees went. He had a red scarf that was older than my mother and had been washed so many times it was the colour of a brick left out in weather.

His other son-in-law — the husband of my aunt Soraya [so-ra-YAA] — is a man I am not going to name in a published book, and he played for that club in the nineteen-seventies, and he was, for about four seasons, genuinely and nationally famous.

He came to lunch. He came to lunch constantly. There is a photograph of me at six years old sitting on the knee of a man whose face was on the side of buildings, wearing a red shirt that had been bought for me before I could walk.

And my brother **Amir [a-MEER]**, who is four years older than me and who has never in his life done a single thing that surprised anybody, wore red from the day he could dress himself and wears it now, in Toronto, at thirty-eight, in a house with a mortgage.

* * *

I supported **Esteghlal [es-tegh-LAAL]**.

Blue. The other one. The one you support if you want every meal in my grandfather's house to become an event.

And I need to tell you when I made that decision, because the date is the point. I was seven. I did not watch a match and fall in love with a player. I did not have a friend who took me. I have gone back over it honestly, as an adult, in a country where nobody cares, and the truth is exactly as small as it sounds:

I worked out, at seven years old, that there was one thing in that apartment that everybody agreed about, and that if I stopped agreeing about it, I would be a person.

That is it. That is the entire origin. It is not a good story and I have told the good story at parties for years — the aunt's husband, the derby, the grandfather's scarf — and none of the good story is the reason.

* * *

And here is the thing I did not see until I was about thirty, sitting in an office in another country being asked, professionally, to describe my own history in chronological order.

Esteghlal means **independence**.

I chose the club whose name is the word for the thing I thought I was doing, and I have spent my entire adult life discovering that I have never once in my life been independent of anything.

* * *

The football came first and the rest of it followed the same road.

At nine my grandfather died — my father's father, the one from the south, the one I will get to. I stopped speaking for six weeks — that part is true and I have not exaggerated it.

And my mother, who is an intelligent and loving woman and who was thirty-nine years old and had a husband who had gone quiet in the same month as his son, in a manner nobody in that apartment would name, did what people of our sort do. Two psychologists. A paediatrician in Jordan Street. A month at her sister's. All of it correct and all of it well-intentioned and none of it worked.

And in Farvardin [far-var-DEEN] of 1377 my uncle Mehran [meh-RAAN] — her younger brother, the one who had gone to the war at nineteen when the rest of the family had arranged things so that nobody had to, the one whose lungs were the family's permanent quiet embarrassment, the one who lived in two rooms in Nazi Abad because he had refused everything anyone tried to give him — my uncle Mehran came up to Elahieh and said: *let me take him south for a week*.

And my mother, who had run out of everything else, said yes.

I came back talking.

She has never forgiven any of it. Not him, not the yard, not Nemat [ne-MAT], not me. She said something to me at seventeen, in a kitchen, that I am not going to repeat, about what she had handed over and what came back.

She was not wrong. That is the thing about my mother. She has been right about all of it from the first week.

* * *

So by fifteen I had been going down there for six years and it had become the fixed and central fact of my life, and my family's relationship to it can be described precisely.

Amir thought it was a phase and told his friends about it as a funny thing his younger brother did, in the tone you would use about a brother who had got into heavy metal.

My aunt Soraya thought it was dangerous and said so once a year.

My grandfather thought it was, and I quote him exactly, because he said it at a table with eleven people at it: *at least it is not the blue lot.*

My mother knew exactly what it was and could not say so out loud, because the thing she would have had to say was: *my son found a room full of men where nobody asks him anything, six months after his grandfather, and I have nothing at home that competes with that.*

* * *

Nobody in that yard knew where I lived.

Nobody. Not for six years.

I got off the bus two stops early and walked in. I owned one set of clothes for it and they lived at Mehran's. My accent went south the moment I came through the passage and I did not do that on purpose, it happened, the way it happens to everybody, and by fifteen I had two accents and used them in two halves of one city and did not consider this remarkable.

Haj Nemat knew. Agha Sadegh [SAA-degh] knew. They had known since the first year and they never once said it in front of anybody, and I did not understand until I was twenty-two that this was the single largest favour any human being has ever done me.

I thought I was passing.

Three hundred and forty men in a walled yard, and I thought I was passing, and every single one of them had clocked me by the second night of the first year, because you can change a coat and you cannot change how a boy holds a tea glass.

* * *

They let me have it.

That is the sentence. That is what those men did, for six years, without a meeting and without a discussion and without one of them ever saying a word to me about it.

A rich boy from the north came down on a bus wanting to be somebody else, and three hundred and forty men from the south of this city looked at him and decided, collectively and silently, to let him have it.

And they gave him the front row, and a light chain, and the part of Abbas [ab-BAAS], and a tempo.

I have spent nineteen years trying to decide what that was.

I have got as far as this: it was the most generous thing I have ever been given, and it was a costume, and both of those are true, and I still do not know whether the men who gave it to me were being kind to a grieving child or were quietly and enormously amused, and the answer is almost certainly that it was both at once and that this is what people are.

2. THE NIGHT — the other son

My father is **Kamran [kam-RAAN] Shabani [sha-baa-NEE]** and my mother is **Layla [LEY-laa]**, and I have never once been able to say her name in a room with my uncle in it without thinking about the marshes.

Because the field where they fed nineteen-year-olds for eight years was called Majnoon [maj-NOON], and *majnoon* is the word for a man who has lost his mind, and the reason it is that word is the old poem — the boy who loved a girl so completely that he went into the desert and forgot how to be a person, and his name is Majnoon and her name is Leyli [ley-LEE].

My uncle went to Majnoon.

His sister is called Layla.

There is nothing in that. It is a coincidence and it means nothing and there are four hundred thousand women in this country with that name. I have known it was nothing since I was about nineteen.

I have never once stopped noticing it.

* * *

My brother is **Amir** and he is four years older than me and there was nothing wrong with him at all.

I mean that as a description and not as an insult, although it took me until about twenty-eight to be able to say it without it being one.

He was handsome in the way that is not a matter of opinion. Tall by fourteen. He had our mother's face, which is a good face, and he had a way of coming into a room that I have watched carefully for thirty years and never once been able to reproduce, which is that he came in as though the room had been waiting for him and he was slightly sorry to have kept it.

He was good at football. He was not brilliant at it and he did not need to be, because he was good at it in the way that gets you picked, which is more useful.

He was funny. That is the one I cannot get around. He was actually funny, at fifteen, in a way that adults laughed at rather than encouraged.

Our grandfather adored him. Our aunt adored him. The famous footballer who came to lunch talked to Amir and was pleasant to me, and there is a photograph from Nowruz [now-ROOZ] 1375 in which Amir is between the two of them with his arms round both

and I am at the end of the row looking at something outside the frame.

I have that photograph. I brought it eleven thousand kilometres. I do not know why.

* * *

And I was the other one.

I was small until I was fourteen and then I went up all at once, which is its own separate problem. And I frowned. That is not self-deprecation, it is a documented family position, and my father's father made a joke of it that lasted my whole childhood.

He called me **Boloor [bo-LOOR]**.

It means crystal. The good kind, the kind that catches light — the word you would use for a chandelier or a cut glass or anything that is in the business of shining.

He started it when I was about four, in the courtyard of the house in Mirdamad [meer-daa-MAAD], with a screwdriver in his hand. I would come into a room with a face like a closed shop and he would say, in front of whoever was there, *ah, here he is. Ali Boloor. The light of the house.*

And everybody would laugh, including me, eventually, at about seven, once I had understood the joke — which is that I was the least shining object in that apartment and he had decided to call me the shiniest, every day, for years, until it became the thing I was called.

I want to be very careful about how this is read, because there is a version of a book like this in which the nickname is a cruelty and the childhood is cold and the boy goes south because there is nothing at home.

That is not what happened and I will not have it.

I was loved. Enormously, obviously, and by everybody in that apartment. My mother and my father did not argue. I want that put down exactly, because a reader will hear it as a good thing and it was not one. What they had instead was a silence — a calm,

courteous, respectful silence that could settle over a dinner table for the whole of a meal, with the radio on low in the kitchen, and that had a door shut somewhere inside it, about money in the early years and about my grandfather's firm in the later ones — and I sat inside it the way every child on earth sits inside whatever the weather of his house is, and it never once occurred to me that the house was not solid, because the house was solid.

It was a warm house in every room except the one my parents were both in. There was always somebody in the kitchen. My father came home at seven and asked me what I had done and listened to the answer, and then went into whatever room it was he went into inside his own head, and stayed there until dinner. My mother taught me to look at paintings before I could read, sitting on the floor with a book open on both our knees, and the reason I can walk into a museum in another country now and not feel like a fraud is entirely her.

I was an introvert in a loving house. Those are two separate facts and I spent years letting people assume the second one explained the first.

It did not. I was simply made that way, and my grandfather — who was made the other way — found it funny, and decided the correct response was to call me the light of the house every Friday for five years, and my father, who was made the other way too, laughed every time and never once said it himself.

* * *

Nobody has called me Bolor since Aban [aa-BAAN] of 1376.

That is the sentence. My mother could not do it. My father tried once, about a month afterwards, in a doorway, and got one syllable out and stopped. Amir said it exactly once more, four years later, over a plate of watermelon, as an insult, which is the only way it could still be said, and I will get to it.

And that was that. A word that had been said out loud in that family several hundred times simply stopped existing, on a Tuesday, and nobody discussed the decision, because there was no decision.

* * *

I did not like being looked at. I did not like being asked what I thought about something at a table. When people came to the apartment I went to my room, and the door of that room was, from about the age of ten, the most important object in my life.

And behind it there was a PlayStation.

* * *

I want to put this down properly because a reader outside will not have it and because it is the whole of my adolescence.

The console came from **Paytakht [pay-TAKHT]**, which is a building off Mirdamad full of small computer shops on four floors, and where in 1381 you could buy any game in the world for the price of a sandwich, on a burned disc, in a paper sleeve, with the name written on it in marker in someone's handwriting.

Nothing was legitimate. Nothing had ever been legitimate. An entire generation of us grew up on pirated everything and never once thought about it, and the discs skipped in the same places, and you learned to hold the console at an angle.

I played, at a conservative estimate, four thousand hours between the ages of ten and fifteen.

And the games I played were the ones with nobody in them. That is the tell, and I did not see it for twenty years. Not the shooting ones. The ones where you build a thing slowly, alone, at night, with the sound low so the apartment does not know you are awake — a city, a stable of cars, a football club run entirely on spreadsheets in which I was the manager and never the player.

At the same age Amir was in the street.

* * *

There was one person.

Sina [SEE-naa]. He lived in the building opposite and he was two years older than me and by the time I was twelve he was a head and a half taller and it stayed that way permanently, and I have never in my life had a friend I did not have to look up at.

Sina was not popular either but he was not unpopular in my way. He was simply enormous and quiet and had absolutely no interest in whether he was in a group, which is a completely different thing from wanting to be in one and failing, and it took me years to work out that we were not the same.

We played together four or five evenings a week for six years. In his room, mostly, because his mother did not mind and mine minded in a way she never said out loud.

And here is what I want on the record.

I never told Sina.

Six years. Four or five evenings a week. My only friend on earth. He knew my grandfather was dead and he knew my mother was difficult and he knew what I thought of my brother.

And every Muharram I disappeared for ten days and came back with my back destroyed and told him I had been at my uncle's, which was true, and he never asked one further question, because he was sixteen and enormous and quiet and it was not in his nature.

I sat in that boy's room with my shirt stuck to me and played video games with him and did not tell him, and I do not have a single good reason.

The best I have is this: everything about the yard worked because nobody down there knew about the north, and I think somewhere underneath I understood that it would also stop working if anybody in the north knew about the yard.

I had built a wall through the middle of a fifteen-year-old and I was maintaining it in both directions and I thought this was normal.

* * *

Amir and I were close until he was about thirteen.

I want that on the record too, because the easy version of this is that my brother was awful to me and he was not, not once, not ever, and that is somehow harder.

When I was six and he was ten he taught me to play chess and lost to me on purpose for about a year before I noticed. When our grandfather died he came into my room and sat on the floor with his back against my bed, every night, for eleven nights, and said nothing, because I was not saying anything, and he had worked out that leaving would be worse.

Eleven nights, on a floor, at thirteen.

And then he turned fourteen and the phone started and the street started, and it was not cruelty, it was simply that the world opened for him at exactly the speed it was closing for me, and he went out into it because that is what you do.

He did not push me away. He drifted, at the ordinary rate, and I let the distance become the point, because by then I had a mechanism for turning things I could not have into things I had chosen.

Red and blue. North and south. Him and me.

By the time I was fifteen we had one real conversation a month and it was about football, and it was hostile, and it was the warmest thing in the house.

* * *

There is a thing he said to me in the summer of 1382, months after everything, when my hands were still in dressings and he was home from Tabriz [tab-REEZ].

He looked at my hands for a long time — he had not been told the true thing and never has been — and he said:

You know you could have just been bad at school like a normal person.

And I laughed. It was the first time I had laughed since Esfand [es-FAND].

And then he said, and this is the part, this is the whole of my brother and the reason I brought a photograph eleven thousand kilometres:

He said: *Whatever it is you go down there for. Is it working?*

Not what is it. Not who are they. Not why.

Is it working.

And I said yes.

And he said: *Good.*

And went to get his phone.

* * *

Seven years later I was in a queue at Imam Khomeini airport at four in the morning and Amir was not there, because he was in Toronto by then and had been for two years, and had gone the way our sort of family goes, which is legally, in a straight line, with documents, with nobody at the airport crying.

I went the other way. Sponsored, lawyered, two and a half years, a man in Vanak [va-NAK] with a photograph of his son in a graduation gown, and a bill that I believed for eleven years I had paid.

Two brothers out of the same eighth-floor apartment in Elahieh.

He is in a house with a mortgage and a garden and a red scarf in a drawer and he has never once had to explain his hands to anybody.

I am the other one.

I have always been the other one. I selected it at seven years old at a table where everybody agreed about something, and I have never in my life been able to work out whether that was the beginning of me or the end.

3. THE NIGHT — the summer of 1381

I am going to stop the funeral for a chapter.

There is a lot of death in this book and a certain amount of blood on concrete and I have been walking you through the worst ten days of

my life at the pace of a man who does not want to arrive. Before I go any further I want to put down the best three months I ever had, because they happened, and because a reader who only has the winter of me does not have me.

* * *

Khordad [khor-DAAD] 1381. I am thirteen, two months off fourteen. Third year of *rahnamayi* [*rah-na-maa-YEE*] — middle school, the last of the three years, the end of it.

And at the end of that year every third-year student in the country sits the same paper, at the same hour, on the same day. It was called the **Sarasari [sa-raa-sa-REE]**, which means *nationwide, across-the-whole-thing*, and that is exactly what it felt like: a single sheet of paper laid across sixty million people, and every thirteen-year-old in Iran pinned under it at nine in the morning simultaneously.

It decides what school you go on to. Which decides, in the way that these things decide in this country, a very large amount of everything.

* * *

I was not a good student. I want that on the record because people assume, from how I turned out and where I ended up, that I must have been.

I was a *terrible* student who got acceptable results by a method that would horrify any teacher alive.

I did not learn the books. I **memorised** them.

Physically, out loud, walking. I walked circles round that apartment — kitchen, hall, past my mother's door, dining room, back to the kitchen — with the book open in one hand at chest height, reading a paragraph, looking away, saying it, looking back, saying it again.

Then the next one. Then both. Then the page. Then the two pages.

Not the concept. Not the reasoning. The words, in order, including the diagram captions, including in one case a printing error that I

reproduced faithfully in an exam because I did not know it was an error.

I did four thousand laps of that apartment between the ages of eleven and fourteen. My mother — an art historian, a woman who had taught me to look at a painting for twenty minutes before saying anything about it — used to stand in a doorway and watch me go past reciting the water cycle in a flat voice, and I know now what was on her face and at the time I thought she was checking whether I was working.

* * *

The last night. Fourteenth of Khordad, 1381.

Nobody sleeps. That is not a figure of speech and it is not just me — that is a national event. On the night before the Sarasari there are lights on in every apartment block in this city at three in the morning, and if you go out onto a balcony you can see them, floor after floor after floor, and every one of those windows has a thirteen-year-old behind it and a mother making tea.

My mother made tea. She made it four times. She did not ask me anything, which was the correct decision and which I did not appreciate for fifteen years.

At about two Amir came in. He was seventeen and had done this himself four years earlier and had, of course, been fine.

He did not offer to test me. He put a plate of watermelon on the desk, cut properly, cold, and said: *Boloor is going to fail and become a taxi driver and I will be embarrassed at parties.*

And went out.

And I ate the entire plate at half past two in the morning with a geography book open in front of me and I want to say now that it is one of the four or five happiest memories I have.

* * *

I slept about ninety minutes. I sat the paper. It was not as bad as anything I had imagined at three in the morning, which is a thing I have since learned is true of nearly everything.

I came out at half past eleven on the fifteenth of Khordad, 1381, into a street full of thirteen-year-olds, all of whom had finished at the same instant, all over the country, and this is the thing about a nationwide exam that nobody tells you:

the summer starts for everyone at exactly the same second.

Sixty million people's worth of children walking out of buildings into sunlight at half past eleven in the morning simultaneously.

I have never felt anything like it since and I do not expect to.

* * *

I went home. I put the books in a bag. I did not open one of them again for eighty-eight days.

And the next morning at nine o'clock I took a taxi to **Paytakht**.

* * *

Paytakht means *the capital*. That is all it means. The capital city.

And it was a building — four floors of it, off Mirdamad, with a name like a government department and the actual contents of a bazaar. Small units, glass fronts, each one about the size of a shipping container, each one run by a man in his twenties who knew everything.

Consoles behind glass. Controllers hanging on pegboard. And discs — thousands and thousands of discs, in paper sleeves, in racks, in shoeboxes, in stacks on the counter, and every single one of them burned, and every single one of them with the title written on the face in permanent marker in the shopkeeper's own handwriting.

Nothing in that building was legitimate and it did not occur to anybody that it might be. An entire generation of us learned what a video game was from a disc a man had copied in the back of a shop off Mirdamad for the price of two sandwiches. It was two streets from my grandmother's house, where my grandfather had sat in the

courtyard taking apart things that did not need taking apart, and I went past her gate most mornings that summer and did not go in, and I have no defence for that either.

You could take a disc back if it did not work. There was no receipt and there was no policy. You went back and said *it doesn't run past the second level* and he took it and gave you another one, because he was going to see you again in eleven days and both of you knew it.

* * *

I went most mornings that summer. Alone, usually.

A taxi from Elahieh down through the top of the city in the early sun. That specific Tehran morning light which is very white and very hard and comes off the walls. The traffic beginning to build but not yet the real thing. The windows down. A driver with the radio on, and every driver in this city has an opinion and shares it.

I was thirteen and had money from Nowruz and no obligations of any kind and I was going to a four-storey building full of games.

I want you to understand: no obligations. None. In this country, in that class, in that year, a boy's summer between rahnamayi and dabirestan [da-bee-res-TAAN] is the last completely empty container he is ever handed. There was nothing. No school, no tutor, no plan.

Except judo, in the evenings, four days a week, in a hall in Gholhak [ghol-HAK] with a sprung floor and a smell that I could describe for a page.

* * *

And **Sina**.

He came with me perhaps one morning in four, and when he did the entire character of the trip changed, because Sina was by that summer already a hundred and ninety centimetres — six foot three — and I was, at thirteen, extremely not.

We looked ridiculous. I have to say it plainly. There was a full head and a half between us. People turned round. In taxis the driver would look in the mirror at Sina folded into the back seat with his knees against the front and then at me and say something, and it was almost always the same joke in one of its four variations, and Sina had a way of absorbing it that I studied for years and never learned.

A shopkeeper on the third floor of Paytakht called us *the exclamation mark* for an entire summer.

And I loved it. That is the part I did not expect to be writing at thirty-four. I *loved* being looked at when I was next to him. I hated being looked at every other second of my life and I have organised my entire existence around not being looked at, and walking through Mirdamad next to an enormous quiet sixteen-year-old while people turned their heads was the only version of it I have ever enjoyed.

Odd, again. Everything about me, odd, again, and for once it did not cost anything.

* * *

The days went like this.

Paytakht in the morning. Home by one with two or three discs. Something to eat that my mother had left. Then the room, the door shut, the curtains half across because of the glare, and the machine on.

Six hours. Seven. The apartment enormous and quiet and hot, the sound of the city coming up eight floors and arriving softened, a fan going.

Judo at six. Come back at eight destroyed and pleased.

And then, two or three nights a week, Sina slept over.

* * *

Those nights are the best thing I own.

We played until three, until four, until it started to get light, on a fourteen-inch television on the floor with our backs against my bed, and there was a specific hour — around half past three — when the whole city genuinely went quiet, and you would hear one motorbike four streets away, and that was all.

And the thing I liked best in the entire world was this, and it is going to sound strange:

I liked watching him play the frightening ones.

I did not play them. I could not. I would get four minutes into one of those games and have to put the controller down and pretend I needed water.

So Sina played and I watched.

He would take the controller and go into whatever hospital or town or house it was, and he was completely fearless in a way that I now think was mostly just a very slow nervous system, and I sat next to him on the floor at two in the morning with a cushion in my lap and watched.

And when it happened — whatever it was, the thing behind the door, the thing in the corridor — Sina would say a single quiet word and keep walking forward, and I would have my whole face in the cushion, and we would both be laughing so hard we had to pause it in case my mother woke up.

That was it. That is the whole activity. A boy of thirteen watching a boy of sixteen walk down a corridor in a haunted building on a fourteen-inch television at two in the morning in Elahieh in the summer of 1381.

I have had a certain number of good hours in my life. Those are the best ones and it is not close.

* * *

Eighty-eight days.

Mirdamad in the sun. Watermelon at two in the morning. A sprung floor in Gholhak. My mother in a doorway not asking me anything.

My brother insulting me tenderly and leaving. An enormous friend folded into the back of a taxi.

And underneath all of it, so quiet that summer that I genuinely did not think about it for weeks at a time:

Muharram was in Esfand.

It was eight months away. It had been going on for four years by then and it was the fixed spine of my life and I did not think about it once between Khordad and Shahrivar [shah-ree-VAR] of 1381, because I was thirteen and it was summer and I was happy.

That is what I want on the record before the rest of this book happens.

I was not a haunted child. I was not a lonely child in any way that a doctor would write down. I had a mother who loved me and a father who asked me every evening what I had done and a brother who put watermelon on my desk and a friend the size of a door and a room with a machine in it and three months of sunlight with nothing in them at all.

And then Esfand came, the way it comes every year, and I got on the number 130 and went south.

Nobody made me.

That is the part I have never been able to explain to anybody in America.

Nobody ever once made me.

4. THE NIGHT — what a heyat actually is

Before any of it goes wrong, I want to explain what one of these things is, in the plain way nobody ever bothers to, because a reader outside this country has been given two pictures and both of them are wrong.

The first wrong picture is the news picture: a mob, blood, fanaticism, a wall of shouting men.

The second wrong picture is the tourist one: an ancient and beautiful folk tradition, colourful, photographed at golden hour, with a caption about the mystical East.

Neither of those is a heyat [hey-AT]. A heyat is closer to a working men's club that has a religion attached to it, and it is one of the most quietly functional institutions I have ever encountered anywhere in the world, and I have now lived in another country and I have not seen its equal.

* * *

Ours had about three hundred and forty regular men and had existed, in one form or another, since about 1327 — 1948 — when it was five men in a basement on a street that is not there any more.

It had a treasurer. That is the first unglamorous fact. There was a ledger, and it was inspected, badly, once a year by three men who did not like each other, which is the correct number of men and the correct relationship between them.

It owned things. A steel trunk of chains. Two dohols. Three cauldrons and the gas burners for them. Eleven metres of tarpaulin. A generator. A PA system that was better than the PA system of the local school. Four hundred metres of black cloth with the verses printed on it, folded in sacks that said SAMAN RICE. And an alam [a-LAM], which was brass and had been paid for in 1341 by eleven men putting in a month's wages each, and whose names were on a piece of paper inside the storeroom door that nobody read and nobody threw away.

And it did things. This is what nobody tells you.

It buried people. If you died in that quarter and you were of that heyat, the washing, the shroud, the plot, the transport, the three days of food for your family and the hall for the seventh and the fortieth were handled, and nobody sent your widow a bill, and nobody discussed the money in front of her, ever.

It lent money. Interest-free, informally, from a fund that was not written in the ledger and that everybody knew about. A man

needed a deposit on a shop, or his daughter was getting married, or the hospital wanted a number he did not have. He went to Nemat. It was never called a loan and it was always repaid.

It found people work. About a third of the men in that yard had at some point been employed by another man in that yard.

It went to prisons. Two of the older men did that and nobody talked about it.

And once a year it fed four hundred families for two days.

* * *

Now. I am going to say the uncomfortable thing, because this book is not a defence.

Every single one of those functions is a function that a state performs in a country where the state performs functions.

Burial, welfare, small credit, employment, care of prisoners, food relief. That is a municipality. That is what a municipality is.

And in the south of this city, in my lifetime, a large amount of it was done instead by several hundred volunteer associations organised around the commemoration of a death in Iraq in the year 680.

That is not mysticism. That is infrastructure with a story bolted to the front of it.

And the story is load-bearing. That is the part that matters and that took me until my late twenties to see. You could not run that system on civic feeling. You could not run it on charity, because charity has a giver and a receiver and men in that quarter would rather go hungry than be seen receiving. You certainly could not run it on the state, which had other priorities.

But you can run it on a vow.

Because a vow has no giver and no receiver. A vow is a debt to God that happens to be settled in your neighbour's direction, and a man taking a bowl of nazri [naz-REE] out of my hands on Ashura [aa-shoo-RAA] is not accepting charity from me, he is helping me pay something I owe. He is doing me the favour.

That is a thirteen-hundred-year-old piece of social engineering and it is the most elegant thing I have ever seen a religion do, and it is why I cannot write the easy version of this book.

* * *

And.

The same machine that buries your father and pays your hospital bill without ever saying the word money is the machine that decides where a boy stands, and how heavy his chain is, and at what speed the drum goes, and what he is told when he asks a question, and whether a death in a yard behind a green gate becomes a fact or becomes the word *Dubai*.

It is one machine. You do not get the burial without the arrangement. There is no version of that yard that feeds four hundred families and also tells a fifteen-year-old the truth on the seventh night, because the same instinct does both — close around it, hold it, keep the day coming, do not let anyone fall out of the row.

Everything good about that place and everything that happened to me came out of the same organ.

I have been in rooms in America where people were free and honest and nobody had lied to me about anything, and when my grandfather Yousef died there was nobody at the door with food, and I stood in a kitchen and thought about a yard with three cauldrons in it, and I want to be extremely clear that I did not, in that moment, think I had got the better end of the deal.

PART TWO — THE BANNERS

5. THE NIGHT — Nazi Abad, the first of Muharram

The banners go up before the month does. That is the first thing to understand about my street. We are early. We are early the way people are early to a funeral when they are afraid of the family.

Agha Rahmat brings out the ladder on the twenty-eighth of Zilhajjeh, which is two days before anything is supposed to start, and he leans it against the shutter of his own shop, and nobody stops him, because who is going to stop a man from hanging black cloth. His son holds the base. The cloth comes out of a plastic sack that says SAMAN RICE on it in green, and it comes out folded, and it smells like the sack and like last year.

I watch from the step of my uncle's building with my hands inside my sleeves. It is Esfand, which is our deep winter, and the cold in Tehran that month is not a soft cold. It is a cold with an opinion. You can see the Alborz [al-BORZ] from the top of our street if you stand in the right place and the air is having a good day, and the mountains are white all the way down to where the city starts, and the city is the colour of a dirty coin.

The cloth goes up. Rahmat gets one corner on the hook and then the wind takes the other corner and he stands on the ladder holding one arm of it like he is dancing with a woman much taller than himself.

His son says, Baba, you're going to fall.

Rahmat says, then catch me.

That is the whole month, actually. Somebody up high, somebody below, an arrangement about catching.

By evening there is black on both sides of the street from the intersection down to the passage. White writing on the black. *Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala [kar-ba-LAA]*. You see that sentence so many times in your life here that you stop reading it, the way you stop reading a stop sign, you just obey it. But it is a strange sentence when you actually pick it up and turn it over. It says the thing that happened is not finished. It says it is happening now, on this street, at this bus stop, behind this bakery. It says you are already standing in the desert and just haven't noticed.

I am fifteen. I have noticed.

* * *

Here is what I know at the start of that month, which turned out to be a very small amount, arranged very neatly, like the contents of a wallet belonging to a man who is about to lose it.

I know that we mourn for a man named Hossein [ho-SEYN], who was the grandson of the Prophet, and who was killed in the desert with his family a very long time ago.

I know it was a thousand years ago. This is what everybody says. A thousand years. Later somebody will tell me the real number and it will be worse.

I know that the story has a river in it and that nobody in the story gets to drink from it.

I know that on the tenth night, if I do it correctly, if I do everything correctly, I come out of my body.

I have never told anybody that last one. Not because it's a secret. Because I assume it is like sweating. I assume it is simply what happens to a person who mourns properly, and that mentioning it would be like announcing to a room that you have kidneys.

* * *

Dayi Mehran comes down at eight with his coat already on. Dayi means mother's brother. I have lived with him for ten days a year for six years and I have never once called him anything else, not his name, nothing, just the word for the relation, which I suppose tells you something about both of us.

He stands in the doorway and does the thing he does before stairs, which is a kind of gathering. He fills up what he can fill. His lungs took mustard gas at a place called Majnoon in a year I wasn't alive for, and what he has now is about a third of a set of lungs and a very complete set of memories about the other two thirds. He breathes like a man drinking through a straw that has gone flat.

He says, they've started already.

I say, Rahmat started already.

He says, Rahmat always starts already. Rahmat would hang black in Farvardin if his wife let him.

And then he laughs and the laugh turns into the other thing, and I look at the wall until it is finished, because that is the arrangement, and he holds the door frame, and when it's done he says, right, and we go.

6. THE PLAIN — Medina, the year 680

A man in Damascus died, and his son wanted the world to say yes to him.

That is the whole beginning. It is not complicated and people make it complicated. Mo'aviyeh [mo-aa-vee-YEH] died and his son Yazid [ya-ZEED] took the seat, and taking the seat was not enough, because a seat is only a seat. What he wanted was the *bay'at* [bey-AT] — the pledge. In that time a pledge was a physical act. You put your hand into the hand of the man you were pledging to, and the hand was the contract, because paper can be burned and a hand in a hand is witnessed by everyone standing there.

Yazid wrote to his governor in Medina [me-DEE-na]. The letter was short. Get the pledge from Hossein son of Ali. Do not accept anything else.

Hossein was fifty-six years old. He had grown up in the house of the Prophet, who was his grandfather, and he had been a small child in that house, and the old men of Medina could still remember him being carried on the Prophet's shoulders in the street. That detail matters. It is not sentiment. It means that everybody in Medina knew exactly whose grandson was being asked to put his hand into that particular hand.

They came for him at night. The governor's men. Hossein went, and he took thirty of his relatives with him, armed, and left them at the door — which is a way of answering a question before it is asked.

Inside, the governor read the letter aloud.

Hossein said he would not give the pledge in the dark. He said a pledge is a public thing, and if you want it, ask me in the morning, in front of the people.

There was no morning. He left the same night.

* * *

He took his family. Not an army — his family. His sons, his brothers, his sister Zaynab [ZEY-nab], his nephews, the women, the children, and a small number of men who had decided a long time ago what they were and were now simply doing it.

They went to Mecca, and they stayed there some months, and while they were there the letters started coming from Kufa [KOO-feh].

Kufa was a city in Iraq that had loved his father. The letters said: come. The letters said: we have no leader and we are waiting. The letters said: the fields are green and the fruit is ripe, come and command us.

There were, by the counting of the old historians, something on the order of twelve thousand of these letters. Sacks of them. Men rode for weeks to deliver them.

Hossein sent his cousin Moslem [MOS-lem] ahead to see whether the letters were true.

They were true when Moslem arrived. Eighteen thousand men put their hands in his hand.

Then Yazid changed the governor of Kufa, and the new governor was a man named Ebn-e Ziad [eb-ne zee-YAAD], and Ebn-e Ziad understood something about crowds that Moslem did not, which is that a crowd is not a number of people, it is a number of people *who can see each other*. He sent soldiers into the streets at dusk. He told the tribal chiefs that the army of Syria was coming. He arranged for a man to weep publicly and go home.

By nightfall Moslem was standing alone in an alley in a city of eighteen thousand allies, knocking on doors.

One woman let him in. He was found the next day and taken to the roof of the palace and killed and thrown down into the square.

The letter warning Hossein not to come never reached him. He was already on the road with the women and the children and the tents, riding toward a city that had, in the space of a single evening, stopped existing in the form he was riding toward.

7. THE NIGHT — four years earlier

I was eleven the first time I understood what Sohrab [soh-RAAB] Ayeneh [aa-yee-NEH] actually was, and I understood it by accident, from the wrong side of a wall.

Ayeneh means mirror. It is a real family name and there are a few hundred of them in this country and I have never once been able to hear it as an ordinary word.

* * *

That year the yard behind the shop was being re-concreted, so for four nights the heyat met in the hall of the boys' school two streets over, which had a stage and a curtain and a smell of feet, and which was the wrong building for it in every conceivable way.

I was eleven and I was small and I had the job that small boys have, which is the tea.

You carry a tray of glasses through a standing crowd of grown men in the dark. That is the job. Nobody teaches you and there is no technique except that you hold the tray at the height of your own chin and you go where the gaps are and men move for you without looking, and by the end of it your forearms are shaking and you have been scalded twice and you would not trade the job for anything on earth, because for two hours you are the only person in the building who is allowed to move.

So I saw it from underneath. I want that noted. Everything I know about how a room like that works, I learned at the height of a tray.

* * *

There is a thing a maddah [mad-DAAH] does at the beginning that nobody notices, and I only noticed it because I was standing in the wrong place.

He walks in early. Twenty minutes early, before it fills, when there are thirty men in a room built for four hundred. And he does not go to the microphone. He walks the room.

Sohrab did a circuit of that school hall like a man checking a car he was thinking of buying. He put his hand flat on a wall. He walked into the middle and clapped once — one clap, and stood still, and listened to it come back off the ceiling. He went to the back corner and clapped again.

Then he went and said something to the man on the mixer and the man on the mixer changed something, and Sohrab clapped once more, and nodded, and that was that.

I asked him about it years later, when I was fourteen and had become a person he would answer.

He said: every room lies to you differently.

He said: in this yard the wall behind you sends it back at you a quarter-beat late, so if you are not careful you start chasing your own voice and you speed up all night and by the end you are running and nobody can breathe. In the school hall it went up into the ceiling and died, so you had to push, and if you push for two hours you have nothing left on the tenth.

He said: they think I am singing. I am doing arithmetic.

* * *

He was twenty-one that year. He was very good-looking in a way that men in that neighbourhood dealt with by making jokes about it, and he had a small motorbike he was ashamed of, and he had a job at a printer's in Molavi [mo-la-VEE] where he set type and came home with ink in the creases of his hands.

And he was, I have to say this plainly, kind to children in a way that adults usually are not — which is that he was kind to us *when nobody was watching*, which is the only kind that counts.

Here is the thing he did for me and it took him four seconds.

I came through the crowd with the tray and got jammed. Genuinely jammed, wedged between two men's backs, tray at chin height,

arms gone, eleven years old, about to drop nine glasses of boiling tea on a carpet in front of the entire street.

And Sohrab, who was on the microphone, who was three minutes from starting, who had four hundred men waiting on him — put his hand over the head of it and said, into the room, in a completely ordinary voice:

Agha, move for the tea.

And two hundred men turned round and made a corridor.

He did not look at me while I went down it. That is the part. He looked at his paper. He gave me a road and then declined to watch me use it, which at eleven I did not have words for and which I now understand was the entire man.

* * *

That night was the first time I ever heard him do the thing with the low note.

He gets to the top of the nowheh [now-HEH] — the lament, the sung part, the one the crowd answers — and there is a place where the melody wants to go up. Everybody in the room knows it wants to go up. Everybody in the room is leaning.

And he sat on the note underneath it.

Once. Twice. A third time. Four hundred men leaning forward like a field of wheat under a wind, and this man in a black shirt at a microphone in a school hall refusing, and refusing, and refusing.

And then, when he finally gave it, the sound the room made was not a cheer and it was not weeping, it was something between, and I was eleven and standing under a tray and the hair came up on my arms.

I did not go out of my body that night. It was the fourth night and I was eleven and it had already happened to me twice, the first time on the eighth night and the second on the tenth, both times at the front.

But I remember thinking, with a tray in my hands, in a school hall that smelled of feet:

He is doing it to them. Whatever happens to me, he is the one doing it.

I was closer than I knew and I was completely wrong about the direction.

* * *

He carried the alam in the shabih [sha-BEEH] that year. He carried it six years in total and I saw five of them.

And I want to put down what it looked like, because I am the last person alive who is going to.

He walked it slower than anyone. That was all. There is no trick in it. The scene is four metres of carpet and a strip of blue cloth held by two boys and a waterskin, and every other man who has ever done it walks it in about nine seconds.

Sohrab took twenty-two. I counted, the last year, because by then I was fourteen and had started counting things.

Twenty-two seconds to cross four metres of carpet, in a yard with four hundred men in it, in total silence, holding a brass hand on a pole.

And when he knelt and filled the skin and lifted the water to his mouth, he held it there.

He held water in his cupped hands in front of four hundred people for — and I know this because I counted that too — nine seconds.

Nine seconds is an extremely long time. Try it. Put your hands up in front of your face and count to nine and imagine four hundred men not breathing.

Then he put it back.

* * *

Four years later I was given his part and nobody told me it had been his, and I walked it in about eleven seconds, and I thought I was magnificent.

And a year before that, in a yard behind a green gate, at four in the morning, eleven men who loved him stood around him for eleven minutes and discussed it.

He was twenty-four.

He could hear a room. He was the only person I have ever met who could hear a room.

8. THE PLAIN — the road, and the man who turned them

They went north from Mecca in a caravan you could have counted from a rooftop.

Somewhere on that road a rider came the other way and told Hossein about Moslem. About the roof, and the square.

He stopped the caravan. He gathered everyone who was travelling with him — including a number of men who had joined along the way believing they were riding toward a city of eighteen thousand friends and a green season — and he told them the truth, out loud, in front of the women and the animals.

Then he said: whoever wants to go, go. There is no obligation on you. Take the night.

Most of them went. This is written down and it is not hidden and I think it should be said more often than it is. The caravan that left Mecca was substantially larger than the caravan that continued the next morning. People did the arithmetic and the arithmetic was not difficult.

What was left was mostly family, and a small number who were not family and stayed anyway.

* * *

In the last week of the journey they met the cavalry.

A thousand horsemen under a commander named Hurr [HORR]. They came out of the heat and they came fast and they positioned themselves across the road, and the first thing anyone noticed was that the horses were finished — heads down, sides going like bellows — and the men on them were grey in the face.

They had been riding since before dawn without water.

Hossein looked at them and said: water the horsemen. And water the horses.

His people got up and did it. They poured for a thousand men and however many animals, and where a man was too far gone to hold the bowl they tilted it for him, and they went on pouring until the caravan's own water was measurably lower.

Hurr's orders were to cut Hossein off from the road and not let him turn back and not let him go forward, and to keep him in open country until further instruction. He had come to arrest a man and the man had watered him.

He rode alongside them after that. Not with them. Alongside. For days. He prayed behind Hossein and he blocked his road in the same afternoon, and if you want to know what that is like, it is like every one of us on this street, all month, every year.

They pushed them off the road and out into flat ground near the river, near a place with a small name. Hossein asked what the place was called.

They gave him a few names. Then somebody said the local people call it Karbala.

He is reported to have repeated it. *Karb* and *bala*. Grief and affliction.

He said, here. Put down the tents here.

That was the second day of Muharram, and there were eight days left, and they had six hundred metres of open ground between the tents and the river, and for five of those days nobody stopped them from walking down to it whenever they were thirsty.

9. THE NIGHT — the second night, and the part

Our heyat is called Heyat-e Bani Fatemeh [BA-nee faa-te-MEH] and it meets in the yard behind Haj Nemat's shop.

Heyat is one of those words that everyone uses and nobody explains. It's Arabic. It means a body, a shape, a form — a group of people that has taken a shape. And that's exactly right, because a

heyat is a street's grief that has been organised until it has a shape, and once it has a shape it also has a treasurer and a storage cupboard and an argument about who gets to hold the standard.

Haj Nemat is a butcher. His shop faces the main road and the yard is behind it, walled, with a steel gate that is always closed and never locked, which is a distinction I did not think about at all until later.

In the yard there is a tarpaulin strung between the wall and the back of the shop, and under the tarpaulin there are carpets laid edge to edge, and they are good carpets that have been ruined in a specific way, worn flat in strips where men kneel. There are bulbs on a cable. There is a generator that they only start when the power goes, and the power goes.

And there are the cauldrons. Three of them, and they are not pots, they are architecture. The big one comes up past my hip. You could bathe a child in it. It's called a deeg [DEEG] and it lives on its side against the wall for eleven months of the year with a piece of plastic over it like a horse under a blanket.

On the second night the yard is half full and the fluorescent tube over the door is doing the thing where it can't decide.

Haj Nemat comes out with a glass of tea and does not drink it. He is fifty-something and built like a door and he has forearms from thirty years of the work. He stands next to me and looks at the yard the way I imagine a captain looks at weather.

He says, Ali jan. This year you're Abbas.

I do not say anything for a second because there is nothing in my mouth.

You have to understand what he has just handed me. Every year on the ninth night the heyat does a shabih — a resemblance. That is the older word for it, and it's a better word than the polite one. The polite word is ta'ziyeh [ta-zee-YEH], from the Arabic for condolence, and it makes it sound like a play. Shabih-khani means resemblance-reading. It does not mean you act as somebody. It means you resemble him, and for a few minutes the resemblance is the closest thing available.

And Abbas is the part. Abbas is Hossein's brother. Abbas is the one who carried the standard. Abbas is the one who went to the river.

I say, me?

He says, you're tall enough now.

I say, but who —

And he turns and walks back into the shop, and the sentence I was going to finish was *but who had it before*, and I have thought about that unfinished sentence probably four thousand times since, and I want to be very clear that he did not dodge it. He simply left before it arrived. There is a difference. I have had nineteen years to decide whether there is a difference and I have decided there is, and I am not sure I believe myself.

* * *

Dayi Mehran is sitting on a plastic chair at the back with the old men. He is thirty-six and he sits with the old men because of the chairs.

I go and tell him.

He says, Abbas.

I say, Abbas.

He looks at me for a while. He has a way of looking at you where you can hear him breathing and it becomes part of the looking.

Then he says, do you know what Abbas actually did?

He got the water.

He says, no. Anyone can get water. Do you know what he did?

And I don't, not properly, not then, and he can see that I don't, and he does something that at the time I found irritating and that I now understand was the single kindest thing anyone did for me that entire month.

He says: I'm not telling you. Go and listen.

10. THE PLAIN — Kufa, the night of the eighteen thousand

I have to go backwards for this one, to before Karbala, to the part of the story that explains everything that happens afterwards, and which most people skip because there is no battle in it.

You will remember that Hossein was in Mecca, and that the letters started coming from Kufa.

Kufa was not a village. Kufa was one of the great cities of the world at that moment — a garrison town in Iraq that had grown into a capital, tens of thousands of people, and it had been the seat of Hossein's father Ali when he ruled. Kufa had loved that family within living memory. Old men in Kufa had prayed behind Ali. The city considered itself, and said so in writing, the natural home of his line.

And when Mo'avieh died in Damascus and his son Yazid took the seat, Kufa wrote.

* * *

The letters are not a legend. The number given in the old histories is around twelve thousand and even if you cut it by nine tenths it is an extraordinary thing.

They came in sacks. Riders carried them across the desert in relays. Some were from tribal chiefs and some were from ordinary men and some carried a hundred signatures because a hundred men had put their names on one sheet in a courtyard.

And what they said, over and over, in different hands, was: *we have no leader. Come. The fields are green and the fruit is ripe and we are waiting for you.*

Imagine receiving that. Imagine sitting in Mecca with a sack of twelve thousand pieces of paper in front of you, each one a man saying *I am with you.*

Hossein did not simply believe it. That is important. He sent someone to check.

* * *

He sent **Moslem ibn Aqil** [**MOS-lem eb-ne a-GHEEL**]. His cousin. His father's brother's son, so a man of the household, trusted absolutely, and — this is the detail that gets me — Moslem took two of his own young sons with him, which is what a man does when he does not think he is going to a war.

Moslem got to Kufa and the city opened.

He stayed in the house of a leading man of the city and men came to him in a steady stream for days, and each of them put his hand into Moslem's hand and gave the pledge.

Eighteen thousand.

Moslem wrote to Hossein in Mecca and the letter said, in effect: it is true. Come. Eighteen thousand men have given the pledge to me in your name.

And on the strength of that letter, Hossein put his sister and his sons and his daughters and his infant on camels and started for Iraq.

* * *

Now. What happened next took one evening, and it is the most instructive evening in the whole of human history, and it is not about Iraq in the year 680.

Yazid replaced the governor. The new man was **Ebn-e Ziad**, and he arrived in Kufa at night, alone, with a small party, his face covered.

And the people of Kufa, waiting for Hossein, seeing a covered rider come in at night, came out into the street and cheered him, because they thought he was Hossein.

He let them. He rode through it and let them cheer, all the way to the governor's palace, and then he went inside and shut the door and in the morning he was the government.

* * *

He did four things, and I list them because they are the whole toolkit and they have not changed in thirteen hundred years.

One. He offered a reward for information and a punishment for concealment, and made both of them specific, so that every man in the city knew exactly what his neighbour stood to gain.

Two. He arrested somebody early and did it publicly, so there was a demonstration.

Three. He summoned the tribal chiefs — the men whose names were on the sheets with a hundred signatures under them — and did not threaten them. He talked to them about the army of Syria. He said the word *Syria* in a room, pleasantly, several times, and let each of them do his own arithmetic about his own sons.

Four. He sent those same chiefs back out into the streets to talk to their own people.

That is the whole method. He did not have soldiers enough to hold Kufa against eighteen thousand men. He never needed them. He simply arranged the city so that no man in it could be certain of the man standing next to him.

* * *

Moslem knew it was coming and moved first. He called out the pledge.

And they came. Understand that. It worked. Four thousand men, some accounts say more, assembled in arms and marched on the governor's palace, and Ebn-e Ziad shut himself inside with a few dozen men, and for about an hour that evening the thing was genuinely, actually won.

Then the chiefs went into the crowd.

They did not fight it. They walked through it talking. A man would find his own uncle beside him saying, quietly, *your mother is at home alone*. Another would hear that the Syrians were two days out. Another would be told that his brother had already gone.

There is a line in one of the old accounts that I have never got out of my head. It says that a woman came out and took her son by the hand and led him away, and a man came and told his brother it was over, and they went by twos and threes.

By ones and twos and threes. Not a rout. No panic. Nobody ran.

The crowd of four thousand men that had the governor of Iraq trapped in his own palace simply, over about ninety minutes, *went home*.

And at the end of it Moslem ibn Aqil turned round to give an order and there was nobody behind him.

* * *

He walked out of that square alone in the dark.

He walked through the streets of a city where eighteen thousand men had put their hands in his hand inside the previous fortnight, and he knocked on doors.

And the doors did not open.

* * *

One did.

A woman named **Tow'eh [tow-EH]**. She was standing in her own doorway waiting for her son to come home, and a man came out of the dark and asked her for water.

She gave him water. Then he asked to sit down. And she looked at him properly and asked who he was and he told her the truth, which he did not have to do, and she took him in and hid him in a room in her house.

Her son came home. She told him. She made him swear.

He informed the next morning.

* * *

They came for Moslem at dawn and he fought them in a doorway and he was wounded and taken up to the roof of the palace, and Ebn-e Ziad had him killed there and his body thrown down into the square.

His two boys were caught later.

And the letter he had sent — *come, it is true, eighteen thousand* — was already three weeks up the road with a rider, and could not be recalled, and reached nobody, because by then Hossein was already on the desert road with the tents and the women and the infant, riding toward a city that had ceased to exist in the form he was riding toward, and there was no way on earth to tell him.

* * *

That is what I mean about this month.

We are not mourning a battle. A battle would be simple. On the tenth day, seventy-two people are killed in an afternoon by an army — but the army is not the point, the army is just what arrives at the end.

The thing that killed them was an evening in a city eighty kilometres away, when eighteen thousand men who meant every word of it went home by twos and threes because somebody spoke to them quietly.

And every single one of those men had signed his name.

That is why the story does not close. That is why we do this every year and will do it next year. Not because a tyrant killed a good man — that happens constantly, that is Tuesday, you do not need a religion for that.

Because eighteen thousand people said *I am with you*, in writing, and then it got dark.

11. THE NIGHT — the third night, and the going out

I should describe how a night works, because a night has a shape and the shape is the point.

It starts with a man talking. Usually a cleric, sometimes just a serious man with a good voice, and he stands with the microphone and talks about something ordinary — debt, or lying, or how to treat your mother — and it is boring, and it is supposed to be boring. It is the flat ground you stand on before the ground tilts.

Then comes the rowzeh [row-ZEH].

Rowzeh means garden. That's all. Five hundred years ago a man in Herat wrote a book about the killing at Karbala and he called it *The Garden of the Martyrs*, and the book was so widely read that after a while people stopped saying "come and hear the reading of the Garden of the Martyrs" and just said "come and hear the Garden," and then just "the Garden," and now the word for a garden is the word for the story of a massacre, and nobody notices, and I did not notice until I was fifteen and someone said it slowly.

The man who reads it is the rowzeh-khan [row-zeh-KHAAN]. He tells it as a story, in prose, at a walking pace. He does not sing. He builds. He will take one small hour of one day at Karbala and he will stay inside it for twenty minutes and make you stand there in it, and the whole craft is knowing exactly when to stop building.

And when the room breaks — when the first man goes — he stops.

Then the nowheh starts, and everything changes.

Nowheh is Arabic and it comes from the sound a dove makes. It's the lament, and it is sung, and it has a beat, and the crowd sings back. There is a lead voice, the maddah, and there is a second man behind him, the zakir [zaa-KER], and zakir means the one who mentions, the one who does not let a name fall out of the world. The zakir has one job. He says *Hossein* into a microphone, over and over, into a delay unit, so that the name comes back doubled and stacked, and that is not decoration, that is the metronome. The whole street is running on a dead man's name used as a click track.

The first section is slow. Latmiyeh, from the Arabic for a blow. Open hand on the chest, once a second or slower, three hundred men, and the sound of it is not what you think. It's wet. It's a single wet slap that arrives from every direction at once and you feel it in the plate of your own sternum before you have decided to join in.

And then the maddah lifts, and the beat doubles, and that is the shoor [SHOOR].

Shoor is a Persian word that means fervour, ardour, boiling over. It also means salty. Nobody thinks about that. I think about that constantly now.

* * *

The third night I am at the front because Haj Nemat has put me at the front, and I do not think anything of this, because I have been at the front since I was nine and by fifteen you no longer ask why the furniture is where it is.

Sohrab's voice comes out of the speakers. He is not there. He has not been there since last Muharram, because he went to Dubai to work, which is a thing men do, and the heyat plays his recordings because his recordings are the best recordings anyone has. Everyone from three streets over comes to our yard specifically to hear a CD.

I have heard people say his voice was beautiful and that is true but it undersells it. What Sohrab could do was *withhold*. He could sit on the low note and refuse to give you the high one, four times, five times, until the yard was leaning forward like a field of wheat, and then he would still not give it, and then he would.

The shoor comes in. Four hundred and something men on the beat. The bulbs on the cable are swinging because someone has knocked the wall.

And I go.

* * *

I want to say this carefully because everyone gets it wrong when they imagine it.

It is not a bang. Nothing tears. There is no tunnel and there is no light and nobody is waiting.

What happens is that the effort stops. That's all. For six hours you have been holding something up — your name, your face, the fact of being a specific boy from a specific street with a specific dead grandfather and a specific silent father — and it is so heavy that you never notice you're holding it, because you have held it since

birth and have nothing to compare it to. And then, on a particular beat, at a particular volume, you put it down.

And the relief is so enormous that the first year it happened I cried for an hour afterwards and could not tell anybody why.

The boy below is in the third row from the tarpaulin, and his hands are moving on the beat without him. From up here the crowd is not men. It is one animal breathing. The bulbs are yellow and swinging and the tarpaulin has a tear in the corner that nobody has fixed in nine years. Haj Nemat is standing by the shop door with his arms folded and he is not beating his chest and he is not weeping and he is not looking at the crowd.

He is looking at the boy.

I come back somewhere in the last ten minutes. There is no seam. You are simply in your body again and your throat is destroyed and your chest is hot and the man beside you is holding you up by the elbow the way men do, without comment, and you hold the next one up, and that is the arrangement.

Walking home Dayi Mehran doesn't talk, because the cold air is a bad customer for him.

At the door he says: good night?

I say: good night.

I have said this exact thing to him for six years and he has said his exact thing back, and neither of us knows what the other one means by it, and I would give a great deal to have that conversation again now that I do.

12. THE PLAIN — the second to the sixth of Muharram

For five days almost nothing happened, and this is the part that gets left out, and it should not be, because it is the part that makes the rest unbearable.

They camped. Seventy-two men, and the women, and the children, and the tents in a curve with the family in the middle. They had the river. Six hundred metres of flat ground and then the Euphrates,

and anyone could walk down and fill a skin whenever they liked. Children went down to it. People washed.

On the third day the army arrived from Kufa, four thousand under a commander named Omar son of Sa'd, and over the following days more came, and the number kept climbing until nobody bothered counting precisely. The old books say the final figure was somewhere in the tens of thousands. Even taking the lowest honest estimate you have several thousand professional soldiers arranged in a crescent against seventy-two men, most of whom were related to each other.

And then they negotiated. For days.

Omar son of Sa'd did not want to do this. That is documented and it is the most modern thing in the entire story. He was not a monster. He was an ordinary competent officer who had been offered the governorship of Rey [RAY] — which is here, which is a district of this city, which is about forty minutes from that yard — as payment for this specific job. He wrote to Ebn-e Ziad in Kufa proposing settlements. Let him go back. Let him go to a frontier. Let him go anywhere.

Ebn-e Ziad wrote back one line: get the pledge or cut him off from the water.

And Omar son of Sa'd read that, and thought about Rey, and gave the order.

* * *

That is what a man is. Not the men with the swords. The man with the letter in his hand doing arithmetic about a district of Tehran.

13. THE NIGHT — the fifth night, the chains

The chains come out on the fifth.

They live in a steel trunk in Haj Nemat's storeroom under a piece of felt, and they are counted out into your hand by an old man called Agha Sadegh who has done this job for so long that nobody remembers deciding he had it.

A zanjeer [zan-JEER] is a wooden or plastic grip, palm-sized, and hanging off it a cluster of flat blunt chain links, twenty or thirty of them, each about the length of your finger. Blunt. It is important that you understand they are blunt, and it is important that you understand what several hundred grams of blunt metal thrown at speed will do to skin over four hours.

You throw it over the right shoulder. Then the left. On the beat. Right, left, right, left, and the men are in rows of twenty and the rows are locked and if you break the rhythm you hit the man beside you, so you do not break the rhythm, and that fact — that your neighbour's back depends on your timing — is doing more work in that yard than any theology.

The first hour is loud and stupid and almost fun.

The second hour your shoulders find the place where the links land and the place becomes a single hot stripe rather than a set of individual hits.

The third hour the stripe stops being pain and becomes information. It's just data. My back is doing something. The report is filed and nobody reads it.

Somewhere in the fourth hour you notice you can no longer feel the difference between your body and the sound.

* * *

Agha Sadegh counts them out and when he gets to me he does the thing he always does, which is take one back.

He puts a zanjeer in my hand and then holds his palm out and I give it back and he gives me a different one from the bottom of the trunk. Every year. Since I was nine.

I said something about it once, when I was eleven, something like *why do I get that one*, and he said *because that one's yours*, and I accepted this completely, because when you are eleven and a man tells you a specific object is yours that is the most satisfying sentence in the language.

Mine is lighter. Not obviously. Not so you'd stare. Two-thirds the weight, maybe. Fewer links and thinner ones and a grip worn smooth by somebody else's hand for years before it was worn smooth by mine.

I found that out at thirty-three, eleven thousand kilometres away, when I lifted somebody else's out of a plastic crate in a rented hall in Los Angeles and nearly put myself on the floor with it, and put it straight back.

But that is the second book and I am getting ahead.

* * *

That fifth night I bleed for the first time, properly, not a graze — an actual line of it running down inside the back of my shirt, warm and then instantly cold in the Esfand air, and I put my hand back there at the break and look at my fingers under the bulb.

And what I feel is *relief*. Enormous, embarrassing relief. Because it means I've done it right. It means I'm in. Nobody in that yard would say that out loud, and every single man in it knows exactly what I mean.

Mehran sees me looking at my hand.

He says, show me.

I turn around and he lifts the shirt and looks and puts it down and says nothing at all, and starts breathing badly, and I assume it is the cold.

14. THE PLAIN — the seventh of Muharram

On the seventh the order was carried out.

Five hundred cavalry were positioned between the tents and the Euphrates. Not to fight. To stand there. That is all it took. Six hundred metres of open ground and five hundred horses on it, and from that afternoon the camp had whatever was already in its skins and nothing else, and it was Iraq, and it was the beginning of October by our reckoning, and there were fifty-odd children in those tents.

The soldiers did not shout at them. Understand that. There was no cruelty in it that would look like cruelty in a photograph. They stood in the sun by the water and they filled their own skins from it, and men who had known each other's fathers called out across the gap to men in the tents, sometimes to insult them, sometimes just to say their names.

Three days.

Here is what three days does, and I am going to say it plainly because the rowzeh-khan said it plainly and I have never got it out of my head. On day one the mouth goes and you are aware of it constantly and it is merely miserable. By day two the children stop being noisy about it. Their crying changes register and then reduces, because crying costs water, and a body that is running out will stop paying for things. By day three the small ones have gone quiet and the quiet is the thing that breaks the adults, because a silent thirsty child is a child that has begun to make arrangements.

They dug a well inside the camp. It came up dry.

They sent men out at night in small parties down to the river and some of them got back with skins and some of them did not.

And the whole time — this is the part I could not hold in my head at fifteen and can barely hold now — the river was audible. It is not a small river. On a still night, six hundred metres, you can hear water.

They lay in those tents for three nights listening to it.

* * *

The rowzeh-khan stopped there. He always stops there. He does not go on to the ninth, not on the seventh night, because the rite has a calendar and the calendar is not negotiable and you get the thirst on the night the thirst happened.

He put the microphone down and it thumped.

And in the silence before the nowheh started, I heard something I have never been able to unhear, which is the sound of four hundred

men in a walled yard in south Tehran, in winter, all swallowing at the same time.

Then somebody at the back stood up and began handing out plastic cups of water from a crate, because that is what we do, that is exactly what we do on the seventh, we hand out water — and every man there took one, and drank it, in the dark, on the night the water was cut.

That is the rite. That is the entire rite in one gesture and it took me six more years to understand what it was doing to us.

You are given the water.

You drink it.

You are not Abbas. You never were. You are one of the eighteen thousand who wrote letters and stayed home.

PART THREE — THE WATER CUT

15. THE NIGHT — the sixth night, and the water

After the seventh chapter of the story is told, the street changes. Not the heyat. The street.

Somebody puts out a sabil [sa-BEEL].

A sabil is a water station and the word comes from the Arabic for a road or a way — something set on the road for whoever is passing, free, no counting. A folding table, a barrel, plastic cups in a sleeve, a boy of about nine whose entire job is refilling the sleeve. Sometimes a length of hose from a shop's tap. Sometimes just a woman standing in a doorway with a tray.

There are four of them between our building and the main road. Four, in three hundred metres, in the coldest month of the year, in a country where nobody is thirsty.

You take one. You always take one. Refusing a sabil is not rude in the ordinary way, it is closer to refusing to shake a hand at a funeral, and I have never once seen anybody do it.

And after the seventh night I cannot stop seeing them.

Ice on the top of the barrel at ten at night. Cups in the gutter, hundreds, flattened, moving very slightly in the wind. A man tipping a whole cup out on the ground because he only wanted a mouthful. A child filling one, drinking half, filling it again. All month, in every direction, water being handed to people who do not need it, in the name of people who needed it and did not get it.

I ask Mehran about this on the way down.

I say, doesn't it seem —

He waits.

I say, we hand it out because they didn't have any.

He says, yes.

I say, so we're doing the opposite of the story.

And he stops walking, which for him is not nothing, and he stands in the cold with his hand flat on the shutter of the bakery and gets his breathing organised, and then he says:

That's correct. That's the point. You do the opposite so that the doing of it hurts.

I did not understand him. I nodded like I did. He knew I hadn't.

16. THE PLAIN — the eighth of Muharram, and the offer

On the eighth, or possibly the ninth, a man rode out from the army with a paper and stopped in front of the tents and called four names.

The commander who came was called Shemr [SHEMR], and he is the closest thing the story has to a villain who behaves like one, and the reason he came is small and domestic and awful. Hossein's brother Abbas, and Abbas's three full brothers, had a mother from the tribe of Kalb. Shemr was Kalbi. They were, in the arithmetic of that world, his people.

So he brought an *aman* [*a-MAAN*]. A safe conduct. A written guarantee of protection. Not for the camp. For four men.

He called their names across the open ground and told them they were not included in what was going to happen. He told them their sister's sons and their brother's children were a separate matter, but they themselves could walk out.

There is a version where Abbas answers with a speech. There are always versions with speeches. The oldest accounts are plainer and worse.

He said, may God curse you and curse your safe conduct. You would give us protection and give none to the son of the Prophet?

Then he turned his back on the paper.

* * *

I want to sit inside that for a second, because at fifteen I did not, and a rowzeh-khan will not let you.

They were offered a way out by name. Not a general amnesty they'd have had to trust. A specific document with their specific names on it, brought by a relative, delivered in daylight in front of witnesses, at a point when there was still water in the skins.

Everything that happens to Abbas after that — everything, the river, the hands, all of it — he chose on the eighth, in advance, with the exit standing right there in front of him holding a piece of paper.

That is why he is not simply a brave man in this story. Bravery is a thing that happens to you in a moment. Abbas had two days to reconsider.

17. THE NIGHT — the seventh night, and the alley

The seventh night I go out early.

That is unusual and I notice it even while it's happening, which is a strange thing to be able to say. Normally it comes at the end of the shoor, in the last half hour, when everything is already destroyed. This time it comes in the second hour, in the middle of the latmiyeh [lat-mee-YEH], on the slow beat, and it comes hard, the way a foot goes through a stair.

The boy below is in the second row and the yard is packed to the gate. There is snow starting, the fine dry kind that does not settle, going sideways under the bulbs. The steam off four hundred men is coming up through the tarpaulin tear.

And then it moves.

That has never happened. In six years it has never once moved. I go up and I stay up, directly above, like something on a string. That is the whole architecture of it.

But this time it goes sideways, over the wall of the yard, over the roof of the shop, over the main road with the black banners across it, and it keeps going for what would be three streets if I were walking, and then it stops.

There is an alley. It is narrow enough that a car could not get in and a motorcycle would have to fold its mirrors. There are steel gates on both sides, painted, one green, one that was blue. There is a drain in the middle of the ground and the ground slopes to it.

A man is lying on the ground with his head lower than his feet because of the slope. He is wearing black, which tells me nothing, because everyone is wearing black.

There are five or six men standing around him. They are standing the way men stand when they are waiting for someone else to speak. One of them has both hands on top of his own head, fingers laced, elbows out. One is looking at the gate. Nobody is kneeling. Nobody is touching him.

The ground around his head is wet and going out toward the drain in a shape like a hand. It is not steaming. That is the detail. It is cold enough that night that everything steams — the men steam, the pots steam, my own breath steams — and what is on the ground is not steaming, which means it has been there a while.

I come back so fast that I go down on one knee and the man behind me hauls me up by the arm of my jacket without breaking rhythm, because that is the arrangement, and I get back on the beat because my row depends on my timing.

But I am not there for the rest of it. I am in that alley for the rest of it.

* * *

Afterwards, in the break, with the tea and the sugar and everybody's ears ringing, I go and find Agha Sadegh, because he is old and because he counts out the chains and because at fifteen those two facts made him an authority on the invisible world.

I tell him what I saw. Not all of it. The alley, the man on the ground, the men standing.

And his face does something that I read, at the time, as awe.

He puts his hand on the back of my neck and he says, God is generous. God is very generous to you.

I say, but where was it?

He says, Karbala. Where else.

And I say, it didn't look like Karbala.

And he smiles and he says the thing that everybody in that yard would have said, the thing that is the most beautiful sentence in our entire tradition and also the most useful sentence anybody ever handed a frightened child:

Every land is Karbala, pesaram. Every land.

I went home happy. I want that on the record. I walked home through the snow beside my uncle with my back opened up and my throat gone and I was happy, because a man with white in his beard had told me I was being shown things.

Agha Sadegh had put his hand on the back of my neck. I thought that was tenderness.

He was turning me to face the other way.

18. THE PLAIN — the night of the ninth

On the ninth the army moved forward and the camp asked for one night.

Just that. One night. Give us tonight and we will answer in the morning. And they got it, and what they did with it is the reason this story survived.

They spent it praying, and mending, and sharpening. The sound of the whetstone in the tents on the ninth is a fixed feature of every telling I have ever heard. A camp of seventy-two men in which almost everyone is a cousin, sharpening.

And at some point in that night Hossein gathered them and had the lamp put out.

That is in the accounts and it is the finest piece of engineering in the entire story. He had the light put out before he spoke, so that nobody would have to be seen while deciding.

Then he told them: they want me. Only me. The night will hide you. Take my family's hands and go out into the dark, each of you take one of them with you, and get away, because these people will not pursue you once they have me.

Then he waited in the dark.

Nobody moved.

His brother Abbas spoke first, and then the others, one after another in the dark where their faces could not be checked, and one of them said the thing that I think about more than any other line in the whole of it. He said: if you killed me and then brought me back to life and killed me again, seventy times, I would not leave you.

And another said, plainly, without decoration: we stay so we are not ashamed.

* * *

There is one more thing about that night and it is the thing they do not put in the pamphlets.

They knew. Every adult in those tents knew what the next day was. They had the information, they had the darkness, they had the exit, and they had until dawn.

And they used the time to sharpen.

Nobody in that camp was surprised on the tenth. Which means nothing that happened the next day was a tragedy in the way a train crash is a tragedy. It was a decision, made in the dark, with the lamp out, by people who were given the chance to be cowards privately and passed it up.

That is what you are mourning. Not that they died.

That they saw it coming and stayed.

19. THE NIGHT — the eighth night, and asking

I try twice on the eighth. I want that noted, because for years afterwards I told myself I never asked anybody, and that is not true. I asked twice and I was answered twice and the answers were kind.

The first is Mehran, in the morning, over bread and cheese and the sound of his chest.

I say, when you were at the front, did you ever see things.

He says, everyone saw things.

I say, no, like — from above. Like you were up.

And he stops chewing. He genuinely stops. And he says, from above.

I say yes.

He says, who told you about that.

Which is not an answer to my question, it is a different question entirely, and I was fifteen and did not hear the difference. I said nobody told me anything, and he looked at the table for a while and then he said, eat, you'll be standing all night.

That's the first one. That's my uncle, who loved me, given a clean shot at it three days before everything, and what he did was ask who told me, and then tell me to eat.

I have decided not to hold that against him. It took me a long time.

* * *

The second is Haj Nemat, in the shop, in the afternoon.

The shop is worth describing because I was in it constantly that month and because of what it becomes. White tiles to shoulder height, grey above. A rail across the back with the hooks on it. Sawdust on the floor in the morning and by evening the sawdust has been walked into a paste at the door and is clean again by the following morning, because he does that himself, last thing, alone.

He is boning out a shoulder when I come in and he does not stop while I talk, and the not stopping is what gives me the courage.

I tell him about the alley. All of it this time. The green gate, the drain, the slope, the men with their hands on their heads, the blood not steaming.

The knife keeps going. Nemat's hands are the best hands I have ever seen do anything. There is no waste in them at all. He takes the blade around the blade bone in one movement and the meat comes off the way a coat comes off a chair.

Then he says, without looking up: describe the gates again.

I do.

He says: one green, one that was blue.

I say yes.

And he puts the knife down.

He puts it down flat on the block and he stands there with both hands on the edge of the block and his back to me, and he stays like that for what I would now estimate at four seconds and what felt at the time like a change of season.

Then he turns around and his face is completely pleasant.

He says, God is showing you Karbala. It's a gift. Don't chase it and don't talk about it, because if you talk about it people will start expecting things from you, and then it stops.

I say, but it looked like —

He says, Ali jan. Every land is Karbala.

The same sentence. From the second man in two days. Word for word.

I have thought a great deal since about the fact that they had a sentence ready.

* * *

Then he does something that at the time was simply the best moment of my year.

He wipes his hands and goes to the back and comes out with a bundle wrapped in newspaper and puts it on the block and opens it, and it is the standard.

The alam. The word means a sign, a marker, a banner — the thing you can see from far away that tells you where your people are. Abbas carried the standard at Karbala, which is why the alam is Abbas, and why on the ninth night the man playing Abbas carries it.

It is brass and steel, about my height, with a hand at the top. A metal hand, palm out, fingers together. Everyone knows what the hand means and nobody says it.

He says, it's heavier than it looks. Practise with it. If you drop it in front of four hundred people you will remember it when you're sixty.

I take it. It is not heavier than it looks. It is lighter.

I did not notice that until I was twenty-one.

20. THE PLAIN — the ninth night, laying the table

On the ninth night the rowzeh-khan does not start where he left off.

He starts at the beginning. Every heyat does this and I have never heard anyone explain why, but the reason is obvious once you have stood in the yard on a ninth night: the yard is full of strangers. All month it is the same three hundred men. On the ninth and the tenth it is everybody — the ones who come twice a year, the boys from other streets, the ones who have not been inside the gate since their father died. So before he takes them into the worst day, he lays the table.

He does it the way you would tell a child, and nobody in the yard is insulted, because everybody there has been told it a hundred times and everybody there still needs it. This is a thing I have not found anywhere else. A room of grown men letting themselves be told, slowly, from the top, something they have known since before they could read.

So. From the top.

Mohammad [mo-ham-MAD] is the Prophet. He has a daughter, **Fatemeh**.

Fatemeh marries **Ali**, who is the Prophet's cousin, and who is the first Imam — the first of the line of guides that our half of Islam follows, and the reason our half is called what it is. Ali is my name. It is also every third man's name in this country, for exactly this reason.

Fatemeh and Ali have two sons: **Hassan [ha-SAN]** and **Hossein**. These are the Prophet's grandsons. He carried them in the street. Old men in Medina remembered it.

Hassan is the second Imam. He makes a treaty with Mo'aviyeh in Damascus and steps back from the fight, and he dies, and there are ugly stories about how.

Hossein is the third Imam. Hossein is who this month is about. He is fifty-six in the year 680.

Mo'aviyeh dies and his son **Yazid** takes the seat and demands the pledge. Hossein refuses and leaves Medina.

Now the family, because on the tenth you need to know who everybody is or the day is just a list.

Zaynab is Hossein's sister. Full sister — same mother, Fatemeh, same father, Ali. She is older than he is. She is not going to fight. She is going to survive, and that turns out to be the harder assignment.

Abbas is Hossein's brother, but a half-brother — same father, different mother. He is thirty-four. He is enormous. He carries the standard. His mother's tribe is the reason Shemr comes out with the safe conduct, and the reason he refuses it.

Ali Akbar [a-LEE AK-bar] is Hossein's eldest son. Eighteen. The family say he looks and sounds like the Prophet, which is a compliment that becomes unbearable later in the day.

Ali Asghar [a-LEE AS-ghar] is Hossein's infant son. Asghar means the smaller. Akbar means the greater. Two sons, the same first name, sorted by size, and that is not a poetic device, that is simply what people did.

Zayn al-Abidin [ZEYN al-aa-be-DEEN] is another son, in his twenties, and he is lying in a tent with a fever so bad he cannot stand. Remember him. He is the only male over the age of childhood who is going to walk off that plain alive, and he lives because he is too ill to be worth killing.

Qasim [GHAA-sem] is Hassan's son. Hossein's nephew. Thirteen.

On the other side: **Ebn-e Ziad** in Kufa, who writes the orders. **Omar son of Sa'd**, who commands the field and does not want to. **Shemr**, who does.

And the last one, the one the rowzeh-khan always saves:

Hurr. The commander of the thousand cavalry who cut them off from the road on the way in. The man Hossein watered.

* * *

Then he goes into the morning of the tenth, and the first thing that happens on the morning of the tenth is Hurr.

He sat on his horse in front of his own thousand men and he began to shake. Visibly. A man beside him said something about it, said something like, you're the bravest man in Kufa, what is this. And Hurr said: I am putting myself between heaven and hell and I am choosing.

Then he rode across the open ground alone.

He got down off the horse in front of the tents with his face in the dirt and said, I am the one who blocked your road. I am the one who brought you here. Is there repentance for me.

And Hossein said yes, and told him to stand up.

Hurr asked one thing. He asked to be the first to go out.

They let him. He was killed in the first half hour, and they carried him back into the tents, and Hossein wiped the dirt off his face with his own hand and said: you are free, as your mother named you. Because *hurr* means free. His name had meant that his entire life and he had spent thirty years being a professional soldier of the government and it had never once been true until that morning.

That is the first death of the day. That is where they choose to start it.

A man who was on the wrong side for the entire story and changed his mind with two hours left.

21. THE NIGHT — the other side of the curtain

I have been writing as though this month belongs to men, and I have been doing it because I was fifteen and a boy and stood where boys stand, and that is exactly the mistake I want to correct now, because it is the mistake the whole outside world makes about us.

What you see from the street is men. Rows of them, bare-armed in winter, chains going, blood on white cloth, drums. That is what the cameras take and it is what people mean when they say Muharram.

It is perhaps a third of it. Possibly less.

* * *

Start with a fact that took me years to be able to state plainly:
almost nothing in that yard would have happened without women, and almost none of them were in it.

Three cauldrons. Four hundred families fed for two days on the ninth and tenth, and a smaller pot going every single night for ten nights. Rice, split peas, dried lime, onion, four sheep. Somebody has to clean three hundred kilos of rice. Somebody has to peel onions in a quantity that is not a domestic quantity, it is an industrial one, and somebody has to do it in a kitchen the size of a normal kitchen, over three days, standing.

That was done in the house behind the shop and in four other houses on our street, by somewhere between twenty and thirty women, some of whom were older than Agha Sadegh.

And when the food went out into the street at three in the afternoon on Ashura, it went out in the hands of men, and every photograph of it that exists is of men.

I said something about that once, at fourteen, in the kitchen, being useless with a knife. Something clever. Something along the lines of *you do all of it and they carry it out*.

And a woman called Mahin [maa-HEEN] Khanom [KHAA-nom], who was about sixty and had forearms like Haj Nemat's, did not stop what she was doing and said:

Whose vow is it?

I did not understand.

She said: your uncle's? Nemat's? Whose vow do you think is in that pot?

She said: I vowed that. When my daughter was sick in Mordad [mor-DAAD]. I vowed it and I paid it and I cooked it and if you think

the payment is the carrying, then you have understood nothing at all.

* * *

That is the first thing. The **nazr [NAZR]** — the vow — is disproportionately theirs.

A vow is a private contract with God and it has no ceremony and no witness and no clergy involved in it, and that means it is the one part of this entire religion that requires nobody's permission. You can make one lying in the dark next to a sick child. You do not need a mosque and you do not need a man.

And so it is everywhere among women in this country, and it is enormous, and the entire economy of Muharram — the food, the tea, the sugar, the black cloth, the candles, the money that is quietly put into Nemat's hand and never counted out loud — is very substantially a settlement of debts that women incurred alone at three in the morning.

* * *

Second thing. They have their own rooms.

There is a curtain in the yard and I have walked past it for six years and never once looked at what is behind it, because I was fifteen and it did not occur to me that there was anything behind it except my mother's absence.

What is behind it is a mourning gathering with its own structure, its own reciter, its own economy and its own emotional rules, and those rules are not the men's rules.

There are **rowzeh-ye zananeh [row-ZEH-ye za-naa-NEH]** — women's rowzeh — held in houses, in the afternoons, all month, and in many neighbourhoods every week of the year. A woman comes and recites. She is paid. She is often extremely good and sometimes she is locally famous and this is a real profession that has existed for centuries and has no male equivalent in the domestic setting.

There is the **sofreh [sof-REH]**, which means a cloth spread on the floor for eating, and which in this context means a votive gathering — a cloth is laid, specific foods are put on it in specific numbers, the story is told, and the gathering is dedicated to a particular figure. The sofreh of Abolfazl — which is Abbas — is the most common of all, and it is for things that are asked for and things that were granted, and it is run entirely by women, in a house, for women.

And they beat their chests. That surprises people. Not in rows, not with chains, but on the same beat, a hand on the chest, for as long as the men do.

* * *

Third thing, and this is the one that reorganised my understanding of the entire month.

The men resemble the dead. The women resemble the survivors.

Look at what the story actually offers each side.

A boy in that yard is offered Abbas, Ali Akbar, Qasim, Hurr, Hossein. Every single one of them dies. The whole male catalogue is a set of ways to be killed well, and a boy grows up choosing between them the way a boy elsewhere chooses a footballer.

And what is offered to a girl?

Zaynab, who watched every man she was related to killed in one afternoon, and was robbed, and roped, and walked eight hundred kilometres, and stood in two hostile courts and spoke, and lived for years afterwards.

Rabab [ra-BAAB], who was Ali Asghar's mother, and who handed her six-month-old to his father to be carried out into the open, and who is said afterwards to have refused shelter and sat out in the open ground of Karbala for a year.

Roqayyeh [ro-ghay-YEH], three or four years old, going body to body in the dark looking for her father.

Sakineh [sa-kee-NEH], Hossein's small daughter, who is remembered mostly for what happened to her afterwards, in captivity, in the dark part of the road.

Not one of them dies on the tenth. Every one of them has to keep going after it.

So the men in that yard spend ten nights rehearsing how to die, and the women in the house behind it spend ten nights rehearsing how to survive somebody, and I would like anyone who thinks this is a male ordeal to sit down and decide honestly which of those two is the harder rehearsal.

* * *

The fourth thing happened on the seventh day and I have never been able to write about it without stopping.

There is a ceremony that had only existed for about a year by then. It started in 1381 — 2003 — and it went through the country like weather, and by 1382 our neighbourhood was doing it.

It is for **Ali Asghar**, the infant.

And what it is, is this: on the seventh day of Muharram, mothers come, and they bring their babies. Hundreds of them. Thousands, in the big halls. Every infant is dressed in a small white shroud, or in green, with a headband, and the mothers sit on the floor holding them.

And a reciter tells the story of a six-month-old carried out into the open ground and held up to be seen.

And at the moment in the telling where the arrow comes, every mother in the room lifts her own child.

Up. In two hands. Into the air.

* * *

Our street did it in the mosque hall because the yard was not for women. I did not see it. I was fifteen and male and I was outside on the step with the other boys and the door was shut.

What I got was the sound.

I have heard a great many sounds in yards and halls in this country. I have heard six hundred ruined throats on a tenth night. I have heard four hundred men make a noise like a building settling when a boy pours water back into a river.

The sound that came through that door was not related to any of them.

It was hundreds of women in a room, all at once, and underneath it — because you cannot lift a sleeping baby into the air without waking it — hundreds of babies, and the babies were the top of the sound.

I sat on a step in the cold and did not know what to do with my face.

* * *

I asked Mahin Khanom about it, years later, on a bad line, from Los Angeles.

I said: why would you do that. Why would any mother in the world do that on purpose.

And she said — and I have not improved on it in a decade of thinking —

She said: because every one of us is going to hold something up one day and not get it back. That is not a story, that is a certainty, that is simply what having a child is.

She said: so we do it once a year, on purpose, in a room full of women who are doing it at the same time, with the doors shut.

She said: your uncle had to carry it out of a marsh at twenty years old on his own in the dark. We do ours together, for two minutes, in the afternoon, with tea afterwards.

She said: which of us do you think is doing this correctly?

* * *

And the last thing, and this is where it stops being general and becomes mine.

Sohrab's mother made the nazri.

Every year of my life. She was one of the twenty. She was the one who did the dried limes, because there is a way of cracking them so they open without shattering and she had it.

And in the year 1382, on the seventh day of Muharram, in the mosque hall, she was in that room.

Her own son had been dead for eleven months and the entire street had agreed to say he was in Dubai and she had agreed to it too, out loud, to neighbours, in a shop, for eleven months.

And she sat on a floor with the other women and listened to a man tell the story of a mother handing over a child.

And when they lifted, she had nothing in her hands.

Nobody in that room did not know.

Nobody in that room said anything.

That is what women do at Muharram, in case you were wondering whether they were merely catering.

22. THE NIGHT — Tasu'a, the yard, the animals

The ninth is called Tasu'a [taa-soo-AA], which is just the Arabic word for nine. Nothing more elegant than that. The tenth is Ashura, which is ten. Our largest days are named after where they fall in a row.

Tasu'a is the day the animals come.

They arrive at six in the morning in the back of a Nissan pickup, four of them, and they are unloaded by being lifted by the fleece over the shoulder and set down on the concrete. They are not distressed. That surprises people who have never been there. They are on a street they don't know, so they stand close together and look at things.

They are tied to the rail by the yard wall. And then — this is the part I want you to sit inside — they are fed and watered.

There is a green plastic bucket. There is a hose. Haj Nemat fills the bucket and puts it down and the sheep drink, and they drink for a

long time, the way sheep do, with a lot of noise and a lot of dropping back out of the sides of the mouth.

It is a rule. You do not slaughter a thirsty animal. You water it first and you feed it first and you do not sharpen the knife where it can see, and you do not slaughter one in front of another one.

I have heard these called mercies my whole life. They are in the books as mercies. And I have never been able to get past the following fact, which arrived in my head on that specific morning while I was holding the bucket, and never left:

We are three days into telling ourselves about children who died with no water, on a plain, six hundred metres from a river.

And we water the sheep first.

* * *

I am fifteen and it is my second year holding.

Holding is exactly what it sounds like. Two of us on the body, one at the head. You get the animal down onto its side — you do not throw it, you fold it, you take the legs and it goes down almost politely — and then you lie half across it and you take the two legs nearest you, one in each hand, and you brace.

Nobody explains any of this. You learn it by being the boy who is nearest when somebody says come here.

The word for the whole business is *qorbani* [*ghor-baa-NEE*], and here is the thing about that word. It comes from an Arabic root, *q-r-b*, and that root means nearness. Approach. To draw close. A sacrifice is not, in the language, a destruction. It is a closing of distance. You open a throat in order to get nearer to something.

I did not know that at fifteen. Mehran told me at some point that winter and I remember thinking it was one of his war things.

* * *

Here is what happens, and I am not going to arrange it.

Nemat kneels at the head. He turns the head toward the south-west, toward Mecca, with one hand under the jaw. He says the words, which take about two seconds, and the words are a permission and an announcement of who this is for.

The knife is long and thin and he sharpened it in the shop twenty minutes ago behind a closed door.

The cut is one movement and it is much deeper than you expect. It is not a slit. It goes through everything at the front of the throat down to the bone, both sides at once, and the noise is not a cry, because you have just removed the animal's ability to make a cry. The noise is air. It is a wet ragged air noise out of the cut end of the windpipe and it goes on for longer than you have prepared yourself for, and it comes in a rhythm, because the animal is still trying to breathe, and it will keep trying for a while.

The blood does not spray. That is television. It comes out in a heavy dropping surge in time with the heart, and there is a great deal of it, and it is very hot. On an Esfand morning it steams. It steams enormously. There is a cloud of it coming off the concrete.

The legs in my hands go rigid and start to kick. Not weakly. This is where the boy is needed. It is not distress, they tell you, it is nerves, the animal is already gone, and I do not know if that is true and I do not think anybody holding the legs believes it while it is happening.

I have my face about forty centimetres from the fleece of its ribs and I can feel the heart under my chest through my coat, going hard, then going wrong, then going small.

Then it stops and the legs go loose all at once, and the loose is worse than the rigid, and you let go and stand up and your knees are wet.

The blood runs to the drain. It goes in a hand shape.

* * *

By ten there are four of them hanging on the rail and the yard smells like a coin held in a fist. The skins come off in that way where it is a wrestle at the start and then it is a zip. The heads are

on the concrete facing different directions with their eyes open and a boy of about seven is squatting looking into one of them very calmly.

At eleven the cauldrons go on.

By two in the afternoon the whole street smells like gheimah [ghey-MEH] — split peas, dried lime, onion cooked down to nothing, meat that was warm this morning — and it is the best smell in the world. I want to be precise. Not a good smell. The best smell in the world.

And I am fasting, or half-fasting, the way you do, and I have been up since five, and my mouth is running water.

I look at the drain. I look at the pot. My mouth is running water.

Whatever a person is supposed to be at fifteen, that is what I was, and none of it fitted together, and nobody in that yard had ever suggested that it was supposed to.

* * *

The reason for all of it, if you ask, is *nazr*.

A vow. Somebody's wife was ill. Somebody's son had the medical exams. Somebody was in a car that should have killed him on the Karaj [ka-RAJ] road and was not. And in the moment of it they said: if this goes the way I am asking, I will feed the street on Ashura.

And it went the way they asked. And now there is a debt, and the creditor is not a person, and cannot be paid in money, and does not send letters.

So you pay it in meat. And you give the meat away — that is the whole mechanism, that is the load-bearing wall. It is called nazri and you may not sell it, you may not keep the good part, you may not check who is taking it. A man in a suit takes a portion and a man who sleeps under the flyover takes a portion and neither of them is asked anything at all.

There is one more layer and Mehran gave it to me that afternoon with a bowl in his hand.

He said: you know why a sheep, and not money.

I said no.

He said: because Hossein is called the slaughtered one. The one who was offered. There's an old story where a father is told to sacrifice his son and at the last second a ram is sent instead and the son is spared. Everybody has that story.

He drank some tea. He said:

At Karbala nobody sent the ram.

23. THE PLAIN — the tenth, the young men

They came out one at a time, because that was the form.

Single combat first, which sounds antique and was in fact simply the procedure, and the seventy-two were very good at it, and for the first part of the morning the arithmetic did not look like arithmetic. Then Omar son of Sa'd stopped allowing it, because he could count, and after that it was volleys and mass and it stopped being combat.

Qasim was thirteen. Hassan's son. There is a tradition, and it is a tradition rather than a certainty, that his marriage to one of Hossein's daughters was performed in the camp during the fighting — an hour of a wedding in a tent with an army outside — and this is the single most theatrical thing in the whole story and every heyat in Iran does it and there is not a dry face in the yard when they do. He asked his uncle three times for permission to go out. Three times he was refused. The fourth time Hossein could not refuse him. He was trampled by horses.

Ali Akbar was eighteen and the family said he had the Prophet's face and the Prophet's voice. He asked, and his father gave permission, and then his father stood and watched him ride out and said, to nobody, and it is recorded: *the most like him in face and speech, and when we longed for the Prophet we would look at this boy.*

He was speared and the horse carried him back and he was brought into the tents and his father put his own cheek against the boy's cheek.

That is the thing they use. Not the spear. The cheek.

* * *

I want to say something about how this lands in a yard, because from outside it must look like professional grief. It is not.

By the time the rowzeh-khan reaches Ali Akbar on the ninth night, every man in there is somewhere else. A man is crying about a boy from Karbala and he is also crying about his own son, or his brother from the war, or the one who went to Sweden and does not call. There is a doorway in the story and the story keeps it open on purpose. That is the function.

I looked around that night and understood, for the first time, that not one of these men was crying about the year 680.

I thought I was the exception. I thought I was the one who was properly there, in the desert, doing it correctly.

I was in an alley three streets away, and I did not know that yet, and I had thirty hours left of not knowing it.

PART FOUR — THE ROLE

24. THE NIGHT — the ninth night, the resemblance

The play is not called a play. It is called shabih-khani [sha-BEEH-khaa-nee], and that means resemblance-reading, and I have thought about that phrase more than about almost any other words in my language.

The polite word is ta'ziyeh, from the Arabic for condolence, and that is the word the newspapers use and the word on the sign at the cultural centre. But the old word, the one Agha Sadegh uses, is shabih. Resemblance. And it does not mean you are acting a person. Acting is a lie that everyone has agreed to. A resemblance is not a lie. A resemblance is a claim that for a short time, in poor light, in a small yard, this is the closest thing available.

They clear a space against the wall. That is the stage. There is no stage. There is a space and a bulb.

There are no costumes to speak of. Green for the family. Red for the army. If you are playing a woman you are a man in black with your face covered, and nobody laughs, ever, not once, not in the history of this country.

And there are no memorised lines. This surprises people. You hold your lines in your hand on a strip of paper called a tumar [too-MAAR] and you read from it in front of everybody, and the reading is not a failure of the performance, it is the performance. Because the moment you memorise it you are pretending to be him. Holding the paper means you are not him. It means you are a butcher's nephew from Nazi Abad with a piece of paper, resembling.

* * *

They put the green over my shoulders and it smells of the trunk.

I have the alam in both hands and it is lighter than it looks and I have not thought about that once.

And the yard is packed to the gate and out into the passage and there are men standing on the wall.

Here is what the scene is. It is short. It is always the same. Abbas takes the empty waterskin and goes down to the river.

I walk the length of the carpet. Four hundred men are silent, which is a sound. Somebody at the back is already crying and the play has not started.

I kneel down at the place where the river is, which is a strip of blue cloth held at either end by two boys younger than me, and it is absurd, and it is not absurd at all.

I put the mashk [MASHK] into the river. The mashk is the waterskin — an actual one, old, stiff as a boot. It fills. Somebody with a jug behind the cloth makes it fill, and everybody knows that, and everybody has stopped breathing.

And then I do the thing.

I lift the water to my mouth in my cupped hands. I am supposed to. It is written on the paper in my hand. I lift it, and I hold it there, and I look at it.

And I put it back.

That is the scene. That is all of it. A man reaches water after three days of nothing and refuses it because there are children behind him who have none, and he pours it back out of his hands into the river.

The yard made a noise I had never heard four hundred men make. Not weeping. Something below weeping. A single low sound like a building settling.

* * *

There is a thing I did in that moment that I have never told anybody and that I am going to put down here because this book is worth nothing if I leave it out.

While the water was in my hands — while four hundred men were not breathing — I turned my wrists about ten degrees.

Because I had worked out, somewhere in the two seconds before, that from the third row back the water would not catch the bulb unless I turned them.

That is the first recorded instance in my life of me editing an event, while I was inside it, for the benefit of people who were not going to remember it. I was fifteen years old and I was standing in a resemblance of the worst afternoon in the history of my religion and I was managing the lighting.

I have done it in every important moment I have had since. I did it at my uncle's grave. I did it in a federal building in Los Angeles with a man deciding whether I could stay in his country. I am doing a version of it now, in this paragraph, and I know I am, and I cannot get underneath it.

* * *

I was fifteen and I want to be honest about what I felt.

I felt magnificent.

Not moved. Not holy. Magnificent. I was the tallest thing in south Tehran. Men I had never spoken to were putting their hands flat on their own chests when they looked at me. Somebody's mother was calling out a prayer from the women's side of the curtain and it had my name in it.

I did not think about the water once. I thought about how it looked when I put it back.

That is the sentence, if you want the whole book in one. I performed the refusal of relief and enjoyed it enormously.

* * *

Afterwards, in the storeroom, taking the green off, Agha Sadegh is folding.

I say, was it right?

He says, it was right.

I say, was it better than —

And I stop. Because I do not have a name to put at the end of that sentence. I have never had a name to put at the end of it. I have spent nine days holding a part that somebody must have held before me and I have never once been told who.

Agha Sadegh keeps folding. He is very old and his hands are not good any more and folding takes him a while.

He says: don't ask me that.

Not angry. Not sharp. Tired, and something else.

Then he says: ask me on the eleventh.

25. THE PLAIN — the river

By the afternoon of the tenth almost all of the men were dead and the children in the tents had not had water for three days.

Abbas took the waterskin.

He went alone, on horseback, in the direction of the Euphrates, and there were something in the order of four thousand men positioned between the tents and the water, and he went through them. That is what the accounts say and I have no way to improve on it. He went through them and got to the bank and got down and put the skin in the river and filled it.

Then he took water in his hands and lifted it to drink.

He had not had water for three days either. Nobody had. He was thirty-four years old and enormous and he had been fighting since morning in armour in Iraq, and he was standing in the river.

Thirty-four. I am writing this at thirty-four. I did not plan that and I noticed it about four pages ago and I have decided to leave it in, because leaving it in is the honest thing and because I have spent this entire book warning you about exactly the pleasure I just felt when I worked it out.

And he stopped.

The tradition preserves what he said to himself, and it is not a speech, it is a man arguing with his own hands. He said something to the effect of: my body, you are worthless. After Hossein you are nothing. He is thirsty and you would drink.

And he put it back.

He got up out of that river with an empty mouth and a full skin and started back with four thousand men between him and the tents,

and now he could not fight properly, because he had one job, and the job was in his arms.

They came at him from the left and took his right arm off at the shoulder.

He moved the skin to the other arm and kept going.

They came at him from the right and took the left one.

He caught the strap of the waterskin in his teeth and kept going.

Then an arrow went into the skin, and the water came out of it, and he watched it come out.

They say the mace came down on his head after that, and that he called for his brother once, and that Hossein came out and found him and could not carry him back, and did not bring him back, and the reason given is that Abbas had asked him not to — because Abbas had children in that camp too, and one of them was standing at the tent flap watching the horizon.

* * *

That is why there are no hands on our standard. There is one hand, at the top, palm out.

That is why he is called Saqqa [sagh-GHAA]. The water-carrier. Not the standard-bearer, not the lion, not the brother. The water-carrier. He is named after the errand he failed.

And that is why my uncle refused to tell me and sent me to listen.

Because if you tell a boy *Abbas got the water*, he hears a man succeeding.

What actually happened is that a man reached the thing everyone in the world wanted, held it in his hands, put it back, and then lost both arms carrying it to children who did not get it anyway.

Nobody drank. That is the story. The water never arrived.

26. THE NIGHT — the tenth, before light

I cannot sleep and I do not try very hard.

It is about half past four and the shabih is six hours behind me and my back is stuck to my shirt in a way that is going to be interesting to undo, and I am lying on the floor of the front room listening to Mehran breathing through the wall, and the breathing is doing the thing it does at night, the long gaps and then the catch.

At five I get up and put my coat on over the shirt and go out.

Ashura morning at five in the morning in Nazi Abad in Esfand is a specific thing that I have not seen the equal of anywhere. The banners are up and there is nobody under them. The whole street is dressed and empty, like a hall after they have put out the chairs and before anyone comes.

It is maybe minus four. The gutters are frozen at the edges. There is a smell of the cauldrons which have been on since three.

And I walk, and I do not admit to myself where I am walking, which is a skill I have had my whole life and which has not served me well.

Down past the bakery. Across the main road. Past the mosque with the loudspeakers still bolted to the pole from last year. Left. Then the second right, which is not really a right, it is a gap.

And the alley is there.

* * *

It is there. That is the whole sentence.

It is about a metre and a half across. There are steel gates on both sides. One of them is green. The other one is a colour that used to be blue and has been sanded and primed in patches and never finished.

The ground slopes to a drain in the middle.

I stand at the mouth of it for a long time. Long enough that a woman comes out of a doorway behind me with a bag and looks at me and decides I am nothing, and goes.

Then I walk in and crouch down by the drain.

The concrete around it is a different colour. Not dramatically. It is the way concrete goes when something has been washed off it hard and repeatedly — a paler patch with a dark edge where the hose did not reach, in a shape that runs out from the drain like a hand with the fingers spread.

There is a thin dark line in the crack between two slabs that no amount of hose is going to get out, because concrete is porous, and I would not have known that at fifteen except that I had spent the previous morning holding sheep and had already learned that you can wash a yard for an hour and the cracks stay.

* * *

I am going to be exact about the next thirty seconds because they were the end of my childhood and I have gone back over them so many times that they are worn smooth.

First I thought: this is Karbala. Every land is Karbala. I have been shown a thing.

Second I thought: Karbala is a plain. Karbala is sand and a river and tents and forty thousand men. There are no steel gates in Karbala. There is no drain in Karbala. There is no hose.

Third I thought about the men standing with their hands laced on top of their heads, and I thought: nobody stands like that in a story. That is not how people stand in stories. That is how my uncle stood in the corridor of the hospital in Farvardin two years ago, the week my grandmother's heart was being looked at, when they came out to talk to him.

And fourth — and this is the one, this is the hinge of my entire life — I thought:

I have been floating over the same place for nine nights and calling it the desert, and it is a hundred and eighty seconds from my house.

I put my fingers on the pale patch. It was concrete. It was cold. It was concrete.

* * *

Walking back the sun was not up but the sky over toward Rey had gone the colour of the inside of a wrist.

There was a man setting out a sabil at the corner. Folding the legs down on the table, sleeve of plastic cups, barrel.

He said, God accept it, agha.

He said it to me, because I was fifteen and in black with my collar wrecked and it was Ashura and I was clearly coming back from something.

He held out a cup of water.

And I took it and drank it, because what else does a person do, and it was so cold it hurt my teeth.

27. THE PLAIN — the infant

I am going to tell this one the way it was told to me, on the tenth day, at about eleven in the morning, in a yard that held six hundred people, by a man whose voice had already gone.

Everyone was dead.

Not the women. Not the children. The men. All of them, the seventy-two, the sons, the nephews, the brothers. Abbas in the river bed with the skin empty. Ali Akbar in the tent. Qasim under the horses. Hurr, first, hours ago, in the morning of a different life.

And Hossein was alone, and he was fifty-six, and he had been in the sun in armour since dawn.

He came out in front of the army and he asked for water for the children. Not for himself. He said it plainly. There is a baby in that tent.

They did not answer.

So he went back and he took the child out of the tent.

He was six months old. His name was Ali, and because there was already an older brother called Ali, they called this one Asghar, which means the smaller.

And Hossein carried him out into the open ground in his two hands and lifted him up so that the army could see him.

That is the whole gesture. He held him up to be seen. He turned so that the ranks could look at him. He said, if you have decided about me, this one has not decided anything. He has done nothing to you. He is thirsty.

There are thousands of men standing there.

And the accounts say a man named Hormola [hor-mo-LAA] put an arrow through the child's throat while he was being held up.

Hossein caught the blood in his hand. He is described as holding his palm under it, and filling it, and then throwing it up into the air.

And there is a line that goes with that which is the reason my throat closes even now, and it is this: he said, *it is easier for me because God is watching*.

Then he went back and dug a small grave with his sword.

* * *

Here is the thing about that story that took me until my twenties to see, and I am putting it here rather than at the end because I want it standing next to what I had just found in an alley three streets from my house.

Ali Asghar was not killed because he was a threat. He was not a soldier. He was six months old.

He was killed because he was *shown*.

The father lifted the child up to be looked at, in order to make the crowd feel something, and the crowd felt something, and the something got the child killed.

Every man in that yard was weeping. Six hundred of them. My uncle was on a plastic chair at the back with his hand over his eyes and his chest going like a bellows.

And I was standing at the front, in the place where I always stood, where I had been put when I was nine, where four hundred men could see me.

Held up.

28. THE NIGHT — the marshes

My uncle went to the war at nineteen and came back at twenty-one with a chest that would kill him twenty years later, on an instalment plan, a little every winter.

He almost never talked about it. What he did instead — and I did not recognise this for what it was until I was much older — was talk about the *water*.

* * *

The place was called **Majnoon**.

It is a word that in Arabic and Persian means *mad*, or *possessed*, and it is the same word that gets attached to the lover in the old poem, the one who goes into the desert over a woman and forgets how to be a person. Majnoon and Leyli. Every child here knows it.

And by an accident that nobody planned, the largest oilfield in that war was called the Mad Islands, and tens of thousands of teenagers were fed into it over eight years, and now when an Iranian of a certain age says the word *majnoon* in a room, everybody knows which meaning is meant, and it is not the poem.

The islands were in the **hoor [HOOR]** — the marshes. Not a swamp in the way you are picturing. A shallow inland sea of reeds, thousands of square kilometres of it, water a metre deep and reeds four metres high, and channels through it that a man in a boat could get lost in for a week.

Mehran used to describe it and his whole face would change, and I want to be precise about this: it did not change into horror. It changed into something closer to homesickness.

He said: it was the most beautiful place I have ever been in my life and I will never forgive it.

* * *

He said the reeds moved all night. Not in a wind. Just moved, the way a crowd moves, and you learned very early not to look at them for too long.

He said the water at dawn went the colour of tea with milk in it.

He said there were birds in there in numbers that do not exist any more anywhere. He said that on one particular morning in the spring of 1365 — 1986 — something startled a flock off the water about two hundred metres from his position and it went up in a sheet, and it took, he said, ninety seconds for them all to get off the surface, and for ninety seconds nobody on either side of that marsh fired a shot.

He said: I was nineteen. I had been awake for two days. I stood up in a reed bed in the middle of a war and watched birds for a minute and a half.

Then he said, and this is the whole of my uncle in one sentence:

He said: *and then somebody shot at us, and I got down, and that is the last time in my life I have ever been anywhere without wondering how long it was going to last.*

* * *

The gas came in 1366.

He did not describe it as an event. He described it as weather, which I have since learned is how everyone who was there describes it.

He said you did not see it. In the reeds you did not see anything. What you got was a smell — and everybody says a different smell, garlic, geranium, cut grass, mustard — and his was **geranium**, which is a flower that grows in a pot on almost every balcony in this city, and which he could not be in a room with for the rest of his life.

He said the thing about that particular agent is that it is patient. It does not put you down. You smell geranium, and you think about it, and then you get on with the afternoon and you feel fine for two hours, sometimes six, and it is in that window that men do the fatal thing, which is nothing. They do not wash. They keep the clothes on. They lie down on the ground and sleep in it.

He said the ones who were quickest to wash lived best. That was the whole lottery. Not courage, not position, not luck in the ordinary sense.

Who washed.

He was in a reed bed. He was standing in water.

He said: I was luckier than any man I know. I was already standing in the only thing that could help me and I did not have to be told twice.

* * *

He came out of it with about a third of the lung tissue a man of that age should have, and the scarring goes on scarring, which is the part people do not understand — it is not an injury he received, it is an injury he continued to receive, quietly, every year, for two decades, from an afternoon in 1366.

And here is the thing I have to put down, because it is the reason my uncle is in this book and not merely in my life.

He learned to carry men out of that marsh.

There was no medic on his section for a period of some weeks and he was the one who had done a fortnight's course in Ahvaz [ah-VAAZ], and so he became the one, at twenty, in reeds, in water up to the knee, with no light.

He put his hands inside three men that he told me about and there were others he did not tell me about.

Two of the three lived.

* * *

So when I say that in a yard behind a green gate at four in the morning in the year 1381, eleven men turned and looked at Mehran —

understand what they were looking at.

They were looking at the only man in that yard who had ever had another man's blood on his forearms in the dark and made a decision about it and been right.

They were not looking at a coward. They were not even looking at a bystander.

They were looking at the most qualified person available.

And he was thirty-five, and it was minus something, and he had a third of a set of lungs and about eight seconds, and he had spent fifteen years not being asked, and the one time in fifteen years that a room turned round and made him the medic again —

he said wait.

* * *

I asked him once, later, in the last year, when he was on the oxygen and had stopped pretending about most things.

I said: if it had been the marsh. Twenty years old, in the reeds. Same wound, same night. What would you have said?

And he thought about it for a long time, which cost him, and then he said:

I would have said the same thing. That is what I cannot get past. I would have said the same thing and in the marsh I would have been right, because in the marsh there is no hospital forty minutes away and no telephone and no choice, and being right is easy when there is only one thing you can do.

He said: it was not the marsh, Ali. It was Nazi Abad. There was a hospital. There was a car and there was a telephone and there was a road.

He said: and I gave a marsh answer.

29. THE NIGHT — Ashura, the street, and the vans

By nine in the morning the street belongs to the dasteh [das-TEH].

A dasteh is a procession and the word just means a bunch, a handful, a group held together — the same word you would use for a bunch of keys. That is the correct amount of poetry for it. It is a handful of men held together, moving at walking pace, and there are five of them out that morning from five different heyats and they have to be timed so they do not meet, and the timing is a real logistical problem that real men have real arguments about in Azar.

Ours goes out at nine-thirty behind the drums.

The drum is a dohol [do-HOL] and it is the size of a table top and the man carrying it is walking backwards half the time so the rows can see the beat. There are cymbals — sanj [SANJ] — three pairs, and the sanj is the thing that gets into your skull, because a drum you feel and a cymbal you cannot get away from.

Twenty across, and however many rows deep, and every man's zanjeer going right shoulder, left shoulder, on the beat.

From a rooftop it would look like one object breathing.

From inside it is four hours of the back of the head of the man in front of you.

* * *

At the top of the street where it meets the main road there are two vans parked with their back doors open and a table set up between them.

White vans. Red crescent on the side. A banner across the front of the table with a line of poetry about the blood of Hossein and, underneath it, in smaller letters, the opening hours.

Blood donation.

There is a queue. Not a small one. Forty men, maybe, some of them still in the black, some with their shirts obviously stuck to their backs, waiting on the pavement on Ashura morning to lie on a

folding bed and have a needle put in and fill a bag with a barcode on it.

I stop and look at it long enough that Mehran, who is walking at the very back where he always walks, stops too.

He says, don't stare.

I say, why is that there?

And he does the thing where he chooses.

He says: because they took the other thing away, and you cannot take a thing away from people. You can only put something in its place.

I say, what other thing.

And he starts walking again, at his own speed, which is the speed of a man with a third of a set of lungs going up a very slight incline, and he says, over his shoulder, in a completely flat voice:

Ask your friend Nemat.

* * *

That is the first time in my life that Mehran ever said Nemat's name with anything in it.

30. THE PLAIN — the man who turned around

I want to tell you about Hurr, and I want to tell it properly, because he is the reason this story is a religion and not a war memorial.

Every year, on the tenth morning, the rowzeh-khan does not begin the day's killing with Hossein and does not begin it with the children. He begins it with a middle-aged government soldier who spent the entire story on the wrong side.

That is a choice. Somebody made that choice, and kept making it, in every yard in this country for hundreds of years. And when you understand why, you understand what this month is actually for.

* * *

His full name was Hurr ibn Yazid al-Riyahi [HARR eb-ne ya-ZEED al-ree-yaa-HEE], and to be clear, the Yazid in his name is his own father and has nothing to do with the caliph; it was a common name.

Hurr means *free*. It is a word about status. In that world it meant a man who was not owned — not a slave, not a client of some larger man, a person whose word belonged to himself.

His mother named him that. It is the ordinary sort of hopeful thing a mother does.

And he then spent thirty-odd years being a professional cavalry officer of the government of Iraq, which is to say a man whose entire working life consisted of doing what a letter from Kufa told him to do.

Hold that. The whole chapter is in it.

* * *

He appears on the desert road with a thousand horsemen.

Here is his situation, and I want you to sit in it rather than watch it. He is a competent officer with orders. The orders are not *kill anyone*. The orders are administrative and they are, in their own terms, entirely reasonable: intercept this party, do not permit it to proceed to Kufa, do not permit it to return to Medina, hold it in open country, await instruction.

Nobody in the history of the world has ever been fired for carrying out an order like that.

And he rides all day in October heat to do it, and by the time he reaches the caravan his thousand men and their animals have not drunk since before dawn.

Then the man he has come to intercept looks at his horses and says: water them.

* * *

Consider what that does to a person.

Hurr was not a fool. He knew that the water in that caravan was finite, and that it was being poured into the mouths of the men who had come to trap them, and that Hossein knew it too.

And there is a detail in the accounts that is almost too much: where a soldier was too far gone to hold his own bowl, the people of the caravan held it for him and tilted it. Physically supported the head of a man sent to arrest them.

That is not diplomacy. Nobody was watching who mattered. It bought nothing.

Then the hour for prayer came, and Hossein asked Hurr whether he would pray with his own men or with the caravan.

And Hurr said: behind you.

A thousand government cavalry lined up behind the man they were detaining and prayed, and then got back on their horses and continued detaining him.

* * *

For four or five days after that they moved together and it is one of the strangest arrangements in any story I know.

Hurr did not attack. He did not permit them to leave the road he had put them on. When they turned toward one town, he moved to block. When Hossein spoke to his people, Hurr's men sat within earshot and listened.

He was, in the plainest possible terms, doing his job to the letter while dying inside it.

And at Karbala, when the ground was chosen — and it was Hurr who did not let them go further — he stood there while a fifty-six-year-old man asked what the place was called, and heard him repeat it, *karb* and *bala*, grief and affliction, and heard him say *put down the tents here*.

Then the letters started arriving from Kufa and each one was worse than the last, and Hurr had to read them and pass them on.

Then the four thousand of Omar son of Sa'd [O-mar eb-ne SAAD] arrived, then more, then more. And on the seventh, Hurr watched

five hundred cavalry ride down and stand between the tents and the river, and understood that there were fifty children in those tents.

He had three more days.

* * *

I want to say what is actually happening to him in those three days, because this is the part the rite is interested in and it is not the swords.

He is a man who has already done the wrong thing, and the wrong thing is now too large to undo, and every hour he stays makes it larger.

That is the most common human situation there is. It is more common than grief. Everyone reading this has been in some version of it — a job, a marriage, a silence, a thing you were part of and did not stop. And the arithmetic is always the same and it is always wrong in the same direction: the more you have already invested in being on this side, the more expensive it becomes to admit that this is the side you are on.

By the morning of the tenth Hurr has been standing next to it for eight days. Everyone he commands has seen him do it. Everyone in the enemy camp has seen him do it. If he turns now he does not merely change sides — he announces to four thousand men that he has spent eight days being the man who brought a prophet's family to a place called grief and affliction and then blocked the road behind them.

And that is precisely, exactly, why the rite starts the day with him.

* * *

At dawn on the tenth, in the ranks, he began to shake.

That is the image. It is preserved in the oldest accounts and it has never been improved on: a senior cavalry officer sitting on a horse in front of a thousand men he commands, in full view, shaking so badly that the man beside him remarked on it.

And what the man said was not kind. He said something like: *what is this? If I were asked to name the bravest man in Kufa I would have said you. What is this?*

And Hurr said: I am putting myself between heaven and hell and I am choosing.

Then he said, and this is the line that undoes the yard every single year: *and I will not choose anything over heaven, even if I am cut to pieces and burned.*

He turned the horse.

* * *

He rode out across that open ground alone with his back to four thousand men.

Think about how long that ride takes. Six hundred metres of flat ground at a walk, because he did not gallop, because a man riding at a camp is a man attacking it. He had to go slowly, in silence, on the tenth morning, with everyone on both sides watching, knowing that any one of the archers behind him could end it and that some of them were his own.

And when he got there he got off the horse and put his face in the dirt in front of the tents.

He said: I am the one who blocked your road. I am the one who brought you to this place. I did not think it would come to this. Is there repentance for a man like me?

* * *

Now. This is the part I need a new reader to sit still for, because everything about this month is contained in the answer.

Hossein could have said many things. He could have forgiven him with a speech. He could have said something enormous.

What he actually said was: get up. Yes. God accepts repentance.

That is all. Flat. Administrative, almost. No sermon, no conditions, no probation.

A man who has personally caused the deaths that are about to occur asks whether it is too late, at the last possible hour, with nothing left to offer, and is told: no. Stand up.

And then Hurr asked for one thing. He asked to be the first man to go out.

Not to be forgiven quietly and stand at the back. He wanted to be *first*, in front of the same four thousand men, so that everyone who had watched him block the road would watch him do this.

They let him. He was killed inside the first hour.

And they carried him back into the tents, and Hossein knelt down and wiped the dirt off his face with his own hand and said:

You are Hurr, as your mother named you. Free.

* * *

Thirty years of a name that was not true, and two hours of it being true, and the two hours are what he is called by forever.

* * *

Here is why the tradition keeps him at the front of the tenth day, and this is the lesson, and every rowzeh-khan in this country knows it whether or not he has ever put it into words.

A mourning rite that only had martyrs in it would be useless.

Think about who is actually in that yard. Six hundred men, and the honest truth about six hundred men anywhere is that almost none of them are Abbas and almost none of them are Zaynab. They are the ones who signed the letter and stayed home. They are the ones who stood in the crescent not wanting to be the one who went. They are the village that waited three days and then came out and did the decent thing. They are, every single year, eleven men in a yard discussing it while somebody bleeds.

If the story only offered you heroes to fail to be, nobody would come back. You would sit in that yard once, measure yourself against a man who cut off his own arms carrying water, and never return.

So the story has a door in it.

The door is a middle-aged government employee who did the wrong thing for eight days for entirely defensible reasons, and turned around with two hours left, and was told *get up* and nothing else.

That is why he goes first on the tenth morning. Before the sons. Before the infant.

Because before you can grieve for people who were better than you, somebody has to tell you that you are still allowed in the room.

* * *

I did not think about Hurr at all when I was fifteen.

I thought about Abbas. Every boy thinks about Abbas. Abbas is the one with the arms and the river and the standard, and a boy hears that story and wants the part.

It took me until I was in my thirties, in another country, with two hands that do not close in the cold, to work out that the story had a man in it for me all along, and that he was not the one I had been given, and that he had been standing at the very front of the tenth morning every single year of my life while I looked straight past him.

31. THE PLAIN — the last hour

He was alone from about the middle of the afternoon.

Fifty-six years old, in the sun, in armour, no water for three days, everyone he had brought with him dead including the six-month-old.

And the army did not close.

That is the detail. Thousands of men in a crescent around one man who could barely lift his arm, and for a long time nobody moved, and the accounts say they were shouting at each other to go and none of them went, and the reason given in every telling I have heard is the same: each of them did not want to be the one who met the Prophet's grandson on the Day of Judgement and had to explain.

So they stood and they waited for somebody else to do it.

Which is not a story about the year 680. That is a story about a Tuesday. That is a story about every corridor and every committee and every alley in the world.

Eventually somebody threw a stone. Then the volleys started, because volleys have no author.

He came off the horse.

* * *

And then the horse went back to the tents by itself.

Zoljanah [zol-jah-NAAH]. That is the name that survived, and it means something like *the winged one*, and it went back across that ground alone with an empty saddle, and the women came out of the tents when they heard it.

Every heyat in this country walks a horse in the procession on Ashura and I did not understand, until I was much older, why it was the horse and not the man. Why the empty saddle is the thing we walk down the street.

Because nobody in those tents saw him die.

They found out the way everybody finds out. Something came home without him.

* * *

Then they cut his head off, and the heads of everyone else, and put them on spears, seventy-two of them, and rode the horses back and forth over the bodies until there was nothing to bury properly.

And they set the tents on fire with the women and the children still inside them.

That is where the tenth day ends. Not with a death. With smoke going up off a camp at sunset, and a horse standing somewhere with nobody on it, and a boy of twenty-something with a fever lying in a burning tent unable to stand up.

32. THE NIGHT — the tenth, the shop, the word

The dasteh comes back at two and the nazri goes out at three and by five the yard is a wreck of paper dishes and by six they have swept it and by seven the tenth night is starting.

I go into the shop at about half past four, when it is empty, because I know he cleans then.

Haj Nemat is doing the block with a wire brush and a bucket.

I say, Haj Agha, what's gameh-zani [gha-meh-za-NEE]?

He does not stop brushing.

He says, who said that word to you.

I say, nobody. I heard it.

He says, where.

I say — and this is the only lie I told anybody that entire month, and it was a stupid one, and he knew — I say, at school.

And he stops brushing.

* * *

He tells me. That is the surprising part. I had gone in expecting to be sent out and instead he wiped his hands and leaned on the block and told me, and he told me straight, and I have come to understand that he told me because he had already decided that the alternative was that somebody else would.

He said: a gameh [gha-MEH] is a blade. Short, heavy, single edge. Some men use a sword.

He said: you shave the head first. You make a small cut in the scalp, here — and he touched the top of his own forehead at the hairline — and then you go along with the flat of it, tapping, on the beat, and the cut opens more, and the head bleeds the way a head bleeds.

He said: it looks like a great deal more than it is. The scalp is full of vessels and they do not close, so half a cup of blood on a white

shroud looks like a man dying, and mostly it is a man who will have a headache and a scab and a story.

He said: mostly.

And then he said the thing I did not expect, which is that he did it. For eleven years. He described the feeling with a precision that I have never heard him use about anything else. He said the moment the cold goes down the back of your neck and you understand that you are no longer negotiating with your own body.

I said, so where is it? Why haven't I seen it?

And he said: it was forbidden. In seventy-three — that is 1994 in the other calendar — there was a ruling. Not a suggestion. A ruling, from the top, that this thing is forbidden, that it is not part of the religion, that it makes us look like savages to people who are already looking for a reason.

He said: and they were right. I want you to understand that I think they were right.

Then he put the brush down.

He said: do you know what it had turned into by the end? By year six it had stopped being about Hossein. I will say that in my own shop and you can tell anyone you like. It had become about which yard bled hardest.

He said: men counting. Men going back out into the street afterwards so the other heyats could see the shroud. A boy from Khani Abad who went too deep on purpose because the year before somebody had said his father went shallow.

He said: that is not mourning. That is a competition with a wound as the score.

And then he said the thing that I did not understand for six years and that I now think is the truest sentence anybody said to me that entire month:

A grief you can win is not a grief.

Then he picked the brush back up.

He said: and it stopped in the street. It did not stop.

* * *

I said, where does it happen.

And Haj Nemat, who had answered every single question I had asked him for nine days, looked at me for a long time with the wire brush in his hand.

And he said: Ali jan, I am going to tell you something and I want you to hear it as a man and not as a boy. There are places in this neighbourhood I will not take you. Not because I do not love you. Because I do.

And I said, that's not an answer.

And he said, no. It isn't.

* * *

I got as far as the door.

And he said, behind me: your grandfather did it.

I stopped.

He said, eleven years, before your father was born. He stood where you stand. And then he held the lamp for the better part of forty more.

And I said, without turning round, because I could not turn round: is that what —

And he said, no. No. That is not what happened to your grandfather.

Which was true, and which was the most enormous lie he ever told me, and both of those things are the case at once.

33. THE NIGHT — my grandfather, going back

He was born in a house four hundred metres from the yard.

That is the thing nobody in my mother's family ever said in a full sentence, and it is the reason for everything in this book.

He was from down there. **Abbas Shabani** was born in Nazi Abad in 1288 to a man who made shoes, and he repaired sewing machines in a shop the width of a door for forty years, and he was good at it in the specific patient way that this country used to reward, and by the time his son was fifteen he had sold the shop and the two rooms above it and bought a house in Mirdamad, when Mirdamad was still half orchard, and moved his wife and his son and his two daughters north, and never once, in the north, stopped being a man from the south.

And every year, on the tenth of Muharram, before it was light, he took a bus back down and went through the gate of a yard behind a butcher's shop, and after seventy-three, through the other one.

* * *

Fifty years. I want the number plain, because it is the only kind of fact about him I possess that nobody in my family has ever disputed. Fifty Muharrams, and the first part of them in the yard with the rest of the men, and the last part of them — the part nobody in Elahieh ever asked about — not doing it, holding the lamp, and the last two of them behind the gate.

My mother knew there was a morning in the year when her father-in-law was not at home. My grandmother knew. My father knew exactly, because he had been born four hundred metres from it and had left it at fifteen and had built himself, over years, a man who was from the north — an accent, a table, a wine cupboard, a wife's family with a footballer at the lunch — and nobody in Elahieh ever asked him about the south, because nobody in Elahieh asks anybody about the south. That is the standard arrangement in a family like mine. Everybody knows there is a morning. Everybody elects not to ask.

There was no religion in the house in Mirdamad either. I want that understood, because a reader outside will assume that an old man who goes south with a lamp is a religious man, and he was not, or not in any way that a mosque would have recognised. He did not pray. He read the paper. He argued with the radio. If you had asked Abbas Shabani whether he believed any of it he would have

looked at you for a long time and said something about the price of tomatoes, and his son, who was made the other way, would have laughed at you, and the laugh would have been genuine, and it would have been in the northern accent, which my father had built himself, over years, the way you build anything.

Once a year, before dawn, in the yard he was born beside, my grandfather stood at a gate and held a lamp for men who were doing a thing he had done himself, for eleven years, when he was about the age my father was that winter.

Fifty years.

* * *

I need to say what I think that was, and then I need to say why I cannot be sure.

I think he had come a certain distance from where he started — not far, not fast, a shop and then a house and then a son with a degree and a Steinway — and that he had done it without ever once building a man to do it in, which is the thing that separates him from his son, and that there was something in him that the house in Mirdamad had no room for, and no vocabulary for, and no permission for, and that once a year he took a bus twenty kilometres south and stood with it in the only place on earth where nobody would ask him a single question about it, among men who had known his father, who called him by a name nobody in the north used, in a yard where his accent, which he had never lost, was simply everybody's accent.

I think he went home to it.

I think that is all it was and I think that is enormous.

* * *

And then, when I was six, he took me.

Left me at the corner with the baker's boy for twenty minutes and came out with the lamp still in his hand and took me back up on the bus and delivered me to Elahieh in time for school and never said

one word about it, and I have no memory of it, none, and I have his one habit and I did not know I had it.

He went south to go back to something.

I went south to become something.

He was going home.

I was going somewhere I had never been and calling it home, and dressing for it, and getting off the bus two stops early, and telling myself for six years that I was passing.

* * *

There is one more thing, and it is the reason this chapter is in this book.

When Haj Nemat put a nine-year-old at the front of the dasteh in the first week — a mute, well-dressed, obviously northern child with an accent like a radio announcer — he was not doing it because a boy who leaves his body fills a yard. He did not know that yet. Nobody knew that yet.

He did it because the boy was Abbas's.

Everything that happened to me for the next six years — the front row, the light chain, the part of Abbas, four hundred and sixty-five thousandths of a second — all of it grew out of one afternoon in Aban 1376 when the news came south and a butcher stood in his shop and thought: *that is the old man's grandson. The little one.*

They did not take me in because I turned up.

They took me in because he had been coming down for fifty years and had never once asked them for anything, and then he was dead, and his son — who had not been through that gate since he was fifteen years old — buried him in three days from a hall in Mirdamad with a hired washer and a hired reciter, and did not send word south, and there was a child.

That is what a heyat is. I have told you what it is twice already in this book and I did not have this part.

They were not adopting a stray from the north.

They were settling something.

34. THE NIGHT — fifty years

I have exactly four solid memories of him.

One is the smell of machine oil, which came off his hands and out of the drawer of the table in the courtyard in Mirdamad where he still, in his eighties, took apart things that did not need taking apart, and which I have never encountered anywhere since and would recognise in a second.

One is a plate of watermelon, cut in that courtyard, in August, with the seeds flicked at a wall.

One is a word.

And one I did not know I had until I was fifteen years old and standing at the mouth of an alley at five in the morning knowing which gate it was.

He died in Aban of 1376. He was eighty-eight. I was nine.

Nobody in my family has ever said the word for what happened to him and I am not going to say it here either, not out of cowardice, but because I have come to understand that the silence is itself the artefact and if I break it in a book I will have destroyed the thing I am trying to describe.

What I will say is this: for two years before he died he was going somewhere, a little further every season, and there was a doctor eventually and a piece of paper eventually and my grandmother put the paper in a drawer, and in the house in Mirdamad and the apartment in Elahieh the thing was referred to, when it was referred to at all, as *his head*. By the last winter he did not know my father. He knew me, sometimes, for a second, and then he would look at me with enormous courtesy, the way you look at a child somebody has brought to lunch. And then in Aban he died, in his own bed, with my grandmother holding his hand, and my father buried him in three days with hired men and did not send word south, and my mother took me to her sister in Karaj for a month, and I stopped speaking for six weeks, and my father tried once to

say a word that had never been his and got one syllable of it out, and my uncle started coming up on Thursdays.

That is the whole of it. That is what a nine-year-old is given.

* * *

Agha Sadegh told me the rest in the hospital corridor about a week after my hands, sitting on a plastic chair with his stick between his knees, and he told it badly and out of order because he was eighty-one and in a hurry and it turned out he had about five months left.

He said: your grandfather did the qameh for eleven years, before your father was born, and he was the reason half of them did it.

He said: not because he was the loudest. Because he was the quietest. There are men who go into that yard to be seen doing it and there are two or three in every generation who go in the way a man goes into a room to put something down, and your grandfather was one of those, and the other men could tell, and they came because of him.

He said: and then he stopped, the year your father was born, because a man with a son does not, and he took the lamp instead, and he held it for the better part of forty years.

* * *

Then he told me what it was for, and I want to set it out carefully, because this is the part I did not understand until I was twenty-two and it reorganised my entire understanding of my own family.

He said: your grandfather had a thing in him. All the time. Every day of the year. He did not drink, he did not gamble, he did not shout at your grandmother, he did not hit anybody, he opened the shop at six and shut it at six and he was pleasant to everyone he met.

He said: and once a year, for about four minutes, before dawn, in a yard, he let it out. And when he stopped letting it out he stood at the gate and held a light for the men who were letting theirs out,

and that was the same thing, and do not let anybody tell you it was not.

He said: fifty years. That is the entire account.

* * *

I said: and then?

And Agha Sadegh said: and then in seventy-three they forbade it.

* * *

Here is the thing that I have turned over for nineteen years and I am not going to pretend to have resolved it, because I do not think it resolves, and because the honest version has two halves that will not sit together.

The ruling was correct. I said that earlier and I will say it again in my own voice and not in Nemat's: putting a blade into your own scalp is a bad thing to do, the ruling that stopped it was right on the medicine and right on the dignity and right on what it was turning into, and I would sign it today.

And.

There was a man in this city who had something in him that had no name, and no doctor, and no word, and no permission to exist at all, and there was exactly one arrangement in the entire world in which it was allowed out — once a year, at a fixed hour, in a walled yard, in front of witnesses who did not ask him a single question about it and never mentioned it for the other three hundred and fifty-four days.

And that arrangement was abolished, correctly, for excellent reasons, by people acting in good faith, and nothing was put in its place except a folding table with a barcode reader on it.

Agha Sadegh said: after that it went behind the gate.

He said: and behind a gate it is a different thing. In a yard with four hundred men and daylight coming and someone's mother at the door with tea, it has edges. Behind a gate at four in the morning

with eleven men who are all committing an offence, it has no edges at all, and every year it gets a little further from what it was for.

He said: your grandfather came one more year after it was forbidden. He was eighty-six. He stood at that gate with the lamp and eleven men behind him who were all committing an offence, and it was not the same and he knew it was not the same and he came anyway, because a man who has one door does not stop going through it when they take the sign down.

Then he said: and then he had a year with no Muharram in it.

I said: what?

He said: 1375. First time in fifty years. Nemat went up to Mirdamad on the bus to fetch him and your grandmother said he was asleep, and he was not asleep. He was sitting in the courtyard with a screwdriver. Nemat stood in front of him for a full minute. Your grandfather asked him, very politely, whether he had come about the machine.

He said: and he died in Aban of the next year.

And then Agha Sadegh, who was a very old man and not a clever one and had no framework for any of this, said the following, and it is the single most devastating sentence anybody has ever said to me:

I have never known whether that was the reason or whether I am an old fool who needs it to be a reason.

* * *

I am thirty-four years old and I hold a professional qualification in a country eleven thousand kilometres from that corridor and I have read a certain amount about all of this in a second language. I have read what the doctors say happens to a brain like his, and I know that it does not need a reason, and that it would have happened to him in a yard with the lamp in his hand exactly as it happened to him in a courtyard with a screwdriver.

And I still do not know either.

That is the position. It does not improve. There is a man who had one scheduled hour a year in which he was permitted to be what he actually was, and the hour was taken away for good reasons, and two years later he did not know his own son, and there is no way on earth to run the other version and see.

* * *

There is one more thing and then I will leave him alone.

Agha Sadegh said: on the last one, in 1374, when it was already forbidden and already behind the gate, your grandfather brought you to the corner of the street and left you with the baker's boy and went in for twenty minutes with the lamp and came out and took you back up on the bus.

He said: you were six.

He said: you have almost certainly seen that gate before.

* * *

I have gone over this ten thousand times and I have no memory of it. None. I have a smell of machine oil and three other things and that is the entire inventory.

But when I stood at the mouth of that alley at five in the morning on Ashura in the year 1382, before I knew anything at all, before I had a single fact —

I knew which gate it was.

I have told myself for nineteen years that this is because I had been floating over it for six years and had memorised the paint.

That is one explanation. It is the small ugly one and it is probably true and I am supposed to prefer it.

And on certain nights, in another country, with two hands that ache before rain, I do not prefer it.

35. THE PLAIN — the road to Shaam

Now I have to go back over it again, because the last part of this story has different people in it and most of the people you have learned are dead.

So. Quickly, from the top, the way the rowzeh-khan does it on the eleventh night when the yard is half empty and everybody's voice is gone.

Hossein, grandson of the Prophet, refused a pledge to Yazid and left Medina. He was turned off the road at Karbala on the second of Muharram. On the seventh they cut him off from the river. On the tenth, after three days without water, every male in his camp was killed. His brother Abbas died in the river bed with a punctured waterskin. His son Ali Akbar, eighteen, and his nephew Qasim, thirteen. His infant son Ali Asghar, held up to be seen, shot through the throat. And Hossein himself, alone, in the last hour.

The tents were burned.

Who is left.

Zaynab, his sister, in her fifties.

Zayn al-Abidin, his son, twenty-two or twenty-three, so ill he cannot stand, and the only adult male alive because of it. He is the fourth Imam. Everything that our half of Islam has after this point comes down through a man who survived because he was too sick to be worth a sword.

Roqayyeh and **Sakineh** and the rest of the children, whose names are given differently in different books.

And that is the entire remainder. Women, children, and one man with a fever.

* * *

They were tied.

The captives were roped and put on camels without saddles and marched first to Kufa — the city that had written twelve thousand

letters — and then, over weeks, to Damascus. Which we call **Shaam [SHAAM]**.

That is a distance of about eight hundred kilometres. In the accounts the heads went ahead of them on the spears, so that the people of each town came out to look at the heads first and then, a little behind, at the family walking.

Zaynab walked into the court at Kufa with a rope on her and the governor Ebn-e Ziad said to her, from the seat, *how did you find what God did to your family?*

And she said: I saw nothing but beauty.

Then she took the room apart. In front of the governor, in front of the guard, roped, a fifty-year-old woman four weeks after watching her brothers and her nephews and her sister's children killed in front of her, and she spoke for long enough and well enough that he ordered her stopped.

She did it again in Damascus, in front of Yazid himself, with the head of her brother in a dish on the floor of the room.

* * *

I want to say what that actually accomplished, because it is the reason there is a black banner on my street.

Yazid won on the tenth of Muharram. Completely. Militarily it is not even an event — a garrison force annihilated a party of seventy-two, and it took an afternoon.

And then he made one mistake, which was to march the survivors through every town between Iraq and Syria, and let them be looked at, and let them talk.

By the time they reached Damascus the story had been told out loud, by an eyewitness, in every market square on eight hundred kilometres of road.

Within four years there were risings. Within sixty years the dynasty was gone.

He killed everyone who could fight and left alive the two people who could speak.

That is what Zaynab is for. That is why she is in every yard in this country every year. Not because she suffered the most, although she may have. Because she is the one who went and told.

The men are why we mourn.

She is why we still know.

36. THE PLAIN — the court at Shaam

They came into Damascus in the morning, because that was arranged. You do not bring a thing like that into a capital at night.

Some weeks of road behind them. The heads went first on the spears, a day ahead, so that each town's population had already been out and looked and formed an opinion by the time the family walked through.

And Damascus — **Shaam** — was decorated. That is in the accounts and it is the detail that tells you what was believed to have happened. The city was hung with cloth. There were drums. People had come out into the streets in the good mood of a public occasion, because what had been announced was a victory over rebels, and a victory is a holiday.

So the women and children of the Prophet's family were walked through a celebration.

* * *

Yazid held court and had them brought in.

Understand the arrangement in that room. He is on the seat. The room is full — courtiers, officers, foreign guests, and the accounts specifically mention an ambassador from Byzantium, which matters, because it means the caliph was showing something to a foreign power.

On the floor there is a dish, and in the dish there is the head of Hossein.

And Yazid, who was a poet as well as a caliph and could not resist a gesture, took a cane and tapped it against the teeth.

* * *

Now.

I said earlier in this book that Zaynab is why we still know, and I said it quickly, and I owe it a chapter.

Here is her position, precisely.

She is somewhere in her fifties. Four to six weeks ago she watched her brothers, her nephews, her sister's children and her own two sons killed in a single afternoon. She was in a tent that was set on fire. She has walked eight hundred kilometres roped, through towns, being looked at. She has been robbed of everything including the cloth she covers herself with, which in her world is not theft, it is a specific and deliberate humiliation.

She has no status. She has no protector. Every adult male of her family is dead except one who is standing behind her with a fever, in chains, aged twenty-two.

She is, in the exact and technical sense of the word this book keeps circling, **ghariba** [**gha-REE-beh**]. The feminine of *gharib* [*gha-REEB*]. A stranger. A person with nobody obliged to come.

And she is standing in front of the most powerful man on earth, in his own hall, in front of his court and a foreign ambassador, with her brother's head in a dish on the floor.

* * *

Yazid says something to her. In one version he quotes poetry. In another he says something about God having humiliated them.

And in Kufa, weeks earlier, Ebn-e Ziad had said the thing that gets quoted most: *how did you find what God did to your family?*

And she had said: **I saw nothing but beauty.**

I want to spend a moment on that sentence because a new reader will hear it as piety and it is not piety, it is a counter-attack.

He has framed the afternoon as a verdict. God did this to you; therefore God has judged you; therefore we are correct. That is the whole imperial argument and it is the argument every winner in history has made.

And she takes it and turns it over. If this was God's doing, then it was not yours. You did not defeat anybody. You were the instrument of something that was already written, and my family walked into it knowing, and they are exactly where they intended to be, and you are standing in a room congratulating yourself for being used.

She did it in one line, roped, in front of the man who could have had her killed for it in the next second.

* * *

Then in Damascus she spoke at length.

I am not going to reconstruct the speech, because there are versions and I do not trust myself with them and because the content is less important than the physics.

What she did was this. She stood in the hall of a government that had just, at enormous political cost, produced a story — that a rebel was put down — and she told a different story to the only audience in the world that could not be prevented from hearing it. The court. The officers. The visitors. The people who would go home and repeat it.

She named what had been done to the children. She named the three days without water. She said, in front of the foreign ambassador, exactly what he had brought into that room in a dish.

And she said — and this is the sentence that ended a dynasty on a delay of sixty years — something to the effect of: *plot as you like and strive as you like, and you will never erase our memory, and you will never kill our revelation.*

Yazid ordered her stopped.

That is the moment. Not a battle. A man in the strongest position any human being occupied in that century, in his own hall, on his own day of victory, having to tell a roped woman to stop talking.

Because he had realised, four sentences too late, that the room was listening.

* * *

And what did it accomplish. This is the part I want a new reader to have, because otherwise this is just an admirable thing that happened to a brave woman a long time ago, and it is not, it is the mechanism.

On the tenth of Muharram, Yazid had won absolutely. Seventy-two dead in one afternoon by a professional army. There was nobody left to raise a flag and no claim left to press and the file was, by any military assessment, closed.

Then he made one decision. He decided to display them.

He marched the survivors through every town between Iraq and Syria and put them in front of crowds, and then put them in his own court in front of his own officers, because a victory is not real until it is seen.

He held them up to be looked at.

And in doing it he gave the only two people who could still speak — a woman in her fifties and a sick young man — an eight-hundred-kilometre stage and a guaranteed audience in every market square on the route.

Within four years there were risings in his name's despite. Within a decade there was a war. Within sixty years the dynasty was in the ground, and the family he had annihilated in an afternoon had become the permanent moral opposition of half of Islam, and is still, thirteen hundred years later, the reason a street in south Tehran goes black in winter.

He killed everyone who could fight.

He kept alive, roped and displayed, the two people who could tell it.

* * *

Zaynab lived. Somewhere between one and two years, most accounts say, though some give longer. She got the survivors home. She is buried either in Damascus or in Cairo and both cities are certain and I am not going to adjudicate.

And this is what she is for, and why every yard in this country weeps for her and not merely about her.

The men in this story are what happens when you decide to die.

She is what happens when you are not permitted to.

They were killed in an afternoon and it was terrible and it was, for them, finished by sundown.

She had to get up the next morning.

And the morning after that.

And walk.

PART FIVE — THE YARD

37. THE NIGHT — the tenth, dusk, the green gate

Between the nazri and the start of the tenth night there is a gap of about an hour when the street is at its emptiest, because everybody has gone home to change or to lie down for twenty minutes, and the light in Esfand at that hour goes a colour I have never been able to name. Not orange. Something under orange.

I go back to the alley.

I do not have a plan. I want to be clear about that, because later everybody assumed I had a plan, and a fifteen-year-old does not have a plan, a fifteen-year-old has a direction.

The alley is exactly as it was at five in the morning, except that now there is a light on above the green gate. A bare bulb in a wire cage, the kind you put over a yard door.

I stand in front of it for a while. Then I do the stupidest and bravest thing I have ever done, which is knock.

* * *

An old man opens it.

Not old like Agha Sadegh. Old like a wall is old. Seventy-something, in a vest and a jacket over it, holding the gate at the edge with two fingers.

He looks at me. He looks at my collar, which is black and wrecked, and at my hands, which are empty.

And his face changes in a way I have seen maybe four times in my life. It is the face of a man who has been waiting for something for a year and has just heard it arrive.

He says: you're Shabani's boy.

And I say yes. Because I am. It is my grandfather's name, and my father's, and mine, and nobody has said it to me like that, in a doorway, in six years.

And he says: no. Not tonight.

And he starts to close the gate.

And I put my hand on it.

* * *

I want to describe what was behind him, because I got about four seconds of it and I have kept those four seconds the way you keep a photograph.

A yard, smaller than ours. Concrete. A washing line with nothing on it. A wooden bench against the far wall.

And on the wall above the bench, at head height, a row of nails, and on the nails, hanging by their grips, a row of shrouds — white, folded, laundered, the way you would hang aprons in a kitchen.

Underneath them on the bench, in a line, wrapped in cloth, in the shape that objects that length are always the shape of.

Six of them.

And the old man saw me looking, and he did not hurry, and he did not slam it. He put his hand flat on my chest, very gently, the way you would move a child away from a stove, and he pushed, and I went back one step, and the gate closed.

Through it he said: go and ask your uncle.

38. THE PLAIN — the eleventh day

The bodies were left where they were.

That is the eleventh day. The army left on the eleventh, taking the captives and the heads, and they did not bury anyone, and they had ridden the horses over the field, and so what was left on that ground was not a set of bodies, it was a field.

For three days nothing happened.

Then a local tribe called the Bani Asad [BA-nee A-sad], who lived in a village nearby and who had taken no part in any of it and who had spent three days deciding, came out onto the plain and buried them.

They did not know who was who. That is the detail that finishes people. They were burying seventy-two men who had all been

decapitated and then trampled, in the open, three days into it, in Iraq. There is a tradition that they could not identify a single one until Zayn al-Abidin came back later and walked the ground.

They dug and they put them in and they put a mark on it.

And that mark is now a shrine with a gold dome that four million people walk to on foot every year.

* * *

There is one more thing about the eleventh and I am going to say it here because I have never been able to put it anywhere else.

The Bani Asad were not heroes. They were a village. They watched an army come, and they watched it camp, and they watched it cut a family off from the river for three days within walking distance of their homes, and they watched the smoke go up off the tents on the tenth.

And then they waited three days, until the army was definitely gone, and then they came out and did the decent thing.

Everybody in this story who is not in the tents is either standing in the crescent not wanting to be the one, or standing in the village waiting for it to be over so they can be helpful afterwards.

That is not a criticism. That is a description of almost everyone who has ever lived. It is certainly a description of every man who was in that alley.

39. THE NIGHT — the tenth, the eleven minutes

Mehran is sitting on the floor of the front room with his back against the wall and the light off, which is where he sits when it is bad.

I say: who was in the alley.

He does not ask which alley.

That is the answer, right there. I got the whole thing before he said a word, because a man who does not ask which alley is a man who has one.

* * *

He talks for a long time. It costs him. Every four or five sentences he has to stop and get organised and I sit there and let him and do not offer him anything, because at fifteen I had decided that this was cruelty and it was the only cruelty available to me.

Here is what he said, in the order he said it, without the gaps.

Sohrab Ayeneh did not go to Dubai.

Sohrab was twenty-four. He had a voice that made a yard of four hundred men into one man. He had been the maddah of Heyat-e Bani Fatemeh since he was twenty-one and he had carried the alam for six years before that and through it, which is to say he had played Abbas six times, which is to say the green cloth on my shoulders last night had been on his shoulders and had gone back into the trunk with him still in it, and nobody had told me because there is no way to tell a boy that.

And every year, before dawn on Ashura, Sohrab went to a yard behind a green gate with about a dozen other men and did the forbidden thing.

Last year the cut went wrong.

Not deep. Mehran was very insistent about that and I have thought about why. It was not deep. It was a scalp cut like the others, in the wrong place, a centimetre or two off, into something that was not supposed to be there or was bigger than it was supposed to be. Mehran used the word *sharyan*. Artery.

And the head bleeds the way a head bleeds, and a scalp artery does not close, and Sohrab went down on the concrete with his head lower than his feet because the yard slopes to the drain.

* * *

There were eleven or twelve men in that yard.

Every single one of them was, at that moment, committing an offence. Not a small one. Not a parking matter. There is a ruling from the top of the country that says this is forbidden, and there are twelve men in a yard at four in the morning with blades and shrouds, and one of them is on the ground.

If you call an ambulance, an ambulance comes with a crew and a form and a question, and behind the crew comes everything else. Every man in that yard has a family. Two of them have shops with licences. One of them is a schoolteacher. One of them is the son-in-law of the man who owns the yard.

Mehran said: nobody decided to let him die. I want you to understand that. Nobody said the words. Not one man in that yard said we should not call.

What happened was that they discussed it.

They stood in a yard and discussed it, and they were reasonable, and they raised good points, and somebody said what about Tajrish, we could drive him, and somebody said which car, and somebody went to get the car, and somebody else said wait, if we move him it gets worse, and somebody said pressure, hold pressure, and they held pressure.

And Mehran — who had been at Majnoon, who had carried men, who was the only person in that yard who had ever put his hands inside anybody — Mehran was the one they turned to.

And Mehran said: wait.

He said it because he thought the bleeding was slowing. He said it because in his experience the ones you move are the ones you lose. He said it because he was thirty-five years old with a third of a set of lungs standing in the cold at four in the morning and everybody in the yard was looking at him and he had eight seconds.

Eleven minutes.

He knows the number because there is a clock on the wall of that yard, an ordinary kitchen clock, and he looked at it when Sohrab went down and he looked at it again when it was obvious.

* * *

And then he said the thing I have carried longest, and it is not about him.

He said: you want to know what actually killed him.

I said yes.

He said: it was not the blade and it was not the artery and it was not me saying wait.

He said: it was that every man in that yard, including him, including me, had come to believe that what was happening on that concrete at four in the morning in Nazi Abad was the same event as what happened on a plain in Iraq thirteen hundred years ago. Not like it. The same. Continuous with it.

He said: and a man who thinks he is standing in a holy afternoon does not think about arteries.

He said: Sohrab went deeper than he had ever gone and he was not being brave and he was not showing off. He was being *accurate*. He was trying to get the resemblance right.

And Mehran, on the floor, in the dark, with a third of a set of lungs, said:

He was accurate about the wrong thing. And so were we, for eleven minutes, standing round him doing theology.

* * *

Then he said the thing that has run underneath every conversation I have had since.

He said: and the terrible part, Ali, the part you will not understand until you are older, is that I still do not know if I was wrong.

He said: maybe he was gone in the first minute. Maybe an ambulance in four minutes does nothing. Maybe I made the correct clinical decision in a yard at four in the morning and he died anyway and the only thing I actually did wrong was live afterwards.

He said: I have had one year to find out and there is no way to find out. That is what it is. It is not guilt. Guilt would be a relief. It is a question that does not close.

And he laughed, and the laugh went into the other thing, and I did not look at the wall this time.

* * *

I said: and Dubai?

And he said: somebody said it. In the yard. Before the sun came up. Somebody said *he's gone to Dubai* and it went round the room like a plate and by six in the morning it was a fact.

I said: everybody knows?

He said: everybody who needs to. That is about eleven families. And their wives. And after that it stops being a secret and becomes something else, which is worse, because a secret is a thing people are keeping and this is a thing people are *not saying*, and there is no lock on it and nobody guarding it and it holds better than any secret ever held.

I said: his mother?

And Mehran looked at the floor for a while.

And he said: his mother makes the nazri. She's been in the yard behind Nemat's shop every year of your life. She was at the pot yesterday.

40. THE PLAIN — the one who lived

Zayn al-Abidin was twenty-two or twenty-three and he had a fever so bad he could not stand up, and that is the entire reason there is a religion for me to be standing in.

Think about the arithmetic of that.

Every adult male in that camp made a decision on the ninth night with the lamp out. Seventy-two of them chose to stay and every one of them was killed for it. And the line — the whole line, everything that comes after, every Imam, every shrine, every black banner on my street in the year 1382 — comes down through the one man who was too ill to make the decision at all.

He did not choose. He was not brave. He was in a tent with a fever, and when they set the tents on fire they had to be told to leave him,

and the tradition says it was Zaynab who stood in front of him and made them.

And then he was roped and put on a camel and walked eight hundred kilometres to Shaam with his family's heads on spears ahead of him.

He lived another three and a half decades.

* * *

There are two things preserved about the rest of his life and they are the only two things I need.

The first is that he wept. Constantly, and for decades, and it is not embarrassed about this in the sources, it is recorded almost as a job title. He is one of the ones who weeps. Thirty-four years.

The second is that he did not talk about it. What he did instead was write prayers. Whole books of them, and they are still read, and they are about almost everything except that day.

A man survived the single worst afternoon in the history of his family, and then spent three decades weeping and writing about other subjects.

I did not think anything at all about that when I heard it, on the tenth day of Muharram in 1382, standing in a yard with my back stuck to my shirt.

I have thought about very little else since.

41. THE NIGHT — the tenth night

Six hundred people. The gate open, the passage full, men on the wall, men on the flat roof of the shop with their legs hanging over.

It is the last night. Everybody's voice is gone. That is part of it — by the tenth night nobody in that yard can produce a clean note, and so the sound of the tenth night is six hundred ruined throats, and it is uglier and better than any other night of the year.

I am at the front.

I have been at the front since I was nine.

* * *

I want to describe the machine properly now, because I spent nine days inside it thinking it was weather.

The speech goes about forty minutes and it is flat on purpose.

The rowzeh goes about thirty and it builds and then stops the moment the room breaks.

Then the slow section. Latmiyeh. Open hand, once every second and a half, maybe slower, and it goes on for a long time — longer than you would think anyone could stand, twenty minutes, twenty-five — and what it is doing is getting six hundred separate men breathing on the same interval. That is all. It is not music. It is respiratory alignment.

Then the shoor comes in and the beat roughly doubles.

And the beat does not vary.

That is the thing I had never once noticed in six years, because it is like noticing your own pulse. The zakir puts *Hosseini* into the delay unit and the delay unit is set, and it does not drift, and it does not accelerate the way a drummer accelerates, and it holds absolutely flat for two hours.

You cannot breathe irregularly inside that. It is not possible. Your chest is being hit on the beat by your own hand and everyone around you is doing it and the man on your left is close enough that you can feel his arm and if you fall out of time you strike him.

Two hours. On no food since dawn, on no sleep since the night before that, in minus four, in the tenth day of a ten-day accumulation.

* * *

I go out at about the fortieth minute of the shoor.

And this time it is different, and I know why now, and the reason is that for the first time in six years I went into it knowing something.

The boy below is in the first row, on the left, three metres from the shop door, and his hands are moving and his mouth is moving and he is not in there.

The crowd is one animal, breathing on the beat.

And above the yard, above the tarpaulin, above the shop roof with the men's legs hanging over it, the whole of the neighbourhood is laid out and it is all going at once — our dasteh in the yard, and another one three streets north on the main road, and the loudspeakers on the mosque, and every one of them is on a slightly different beat, and it sounds like several machines in one factory.

And the alley is in the middle of it. The alley is dark. Nobody is in it. There is a bulb on above the green gate.

And it is not the desert. It has never once been the desert.

Six hundred men below me are weeping for a plain in Iraq thirteen hundred years ago and I am the only person in this neighbourhood who has been hovering over a drain in a side street for six years calling it Karbala, and the reason I am the only one, the reason nobody else is up here, the reason this does not happen to Agha Sadegh or my uncle or the man on my left —

— is that it does not happen to anybody.

I came back so hard that I was sick on the carpet.

* * *

They took me into the shop.

Two men under the arms, through the door, past the block, into the back where the sawdust is, and they sat me on a crate and somebody put a glass of tea in my hand with four sugars in it, and the noise from the yard came through the wall like weather.

And then everybody left, and Haj Nemat closed the door.

* * *

He sat on the other crate. He is a big man and he sat with his forearms on his knees and his hands hanging.

He said: how long have you known?

I said: since this morning.

He said: which part.

And that was when I understood that there were parts.

* * *

He told me. He did not defend himself and he did not soften it and I have to say, having had nineteen years to be angry about that night, that the way he did it was the only decent thing available to him by then.

He said: you were nine.

He said: your grandfather had been dead six months. Your mother had taken you to her sister in Karaj for a month and brought you back the same. You had stopped speaking. Not shy. Stopped. Six weeks of nothing, and then five months of the least a child can get away with, not to your uncle, not to a doctor, nothing you did not have to.

He said: and I put you at the front of the dasteh on the first night of Muharram because I did not know what else to do with a child who would barely speak.

He said: and on the eighth night you went down and came back up and you were talking. You talked for two hours. You would not stop.

And he said: so I kept you at the front.

* * *

Then he told me the rest, which took about four minutes and unmade my entire life.

He said: your chains are light. Sadegh gives you the light one. He has given you the light one since the first year.

He said: you are at the front because the front is where the delay unit is loudest and where the beat is cleanest, and at the back the beat arrives late off the wall and it drifts.

He said: I do not let you eat on the ninth and tenth. You think you are fasting. You are not fasting, there is no fast in Muharram, there has never been a fast in Muharram. Your uncle and I agreed it when you were ten.

He said: I keep you up. The night before Ashura I always find you something to do.

And he said the thing about the beat.

He said: Sohrab used to run the shoor at about a hundred and forty. Fast. That is the fashion, that is what the young men want, that is what fills a yard. And in the second year I noticed you did not go under at a hundred and forty. You went under at a hundred and twenty-nine.

He said: so I asked him to hold it at a hundred and twenty-nine. Not a hundred and thirty. A hundred and twenty-nine.

And then Haj Nemat, a butcher, fifty-six years old, in the back of his own shop, said the following sentence, and I have carried it across an ocean:

Four hundred and sixty-five thousandths of a second between one beat and the next. That is your number. I have known your number since you were ten years old.

* * *

I said: why.

And he said: because when you go under, the yard fills.

He said it flatly. He did not dress it.

He said: a boy who leaves his body is a sign. A sign brings people. People bring money. Money fills three cauldrons that feed four hundred families for two days and pays for the tarpaulin and the generator and Agha Sadegh's rent, which he does not know I pay.

He said: I am a butcher and I run a heyat and both of those are businesses and I have never once pretended otherwise to God.

And I said — and I was fifteen, and my throat was destroyed, and I had been sick on a carpet in front of six hundred people, and this is the only thing I could get out:

I said: so it isn't real.

And he looked at me.

And he said: I did not say that.

He said: I said I know the number.

42. THE NIGHT — what the butcher called me

There is a thing that happened in the first week of the first year that I did not understand at nine, could not have understood, and that I have not been able to put down anywhere in this book until now because until now you did not have the word.

It was Farvardin, not Muharram. That is worth saying. My uncle brought me south in the spring, a month before any of it, because a paediatrician in Jordan Street had run out of things to try and because he had asked my mother for a week.

We went into the shop for meat. That is all it was. My uncle needed meat and the man he bought meat from was Haj Nemat Qorbani, and I was nine and standing by the door not saying anything, which is what I did then.

And Haj Nemat came round the block wiping his hands and looked at me for slightly too long.

And he said, to my uncle, but loudly enough that it was for me:

So this is the crystal.

* * *

I did not react. I had not reacted to anything for five months.

But my uncle put his hand flat on the counter, which is a thing he did, and did not say anything for a while, and then said something about the meat.

* * *

I did not think about it again for six years.

Six years. I was in that man's yard sixty nights. He put me at the front of a procession and gave me a light chain and a part in a play and held a drum machine at a specific number for me, and in all of that time he never used the word again, not once.

And then on the tenth night of 1382, in the back of that shop, on a crate, with a glass of tea in my hand and four sugars in it and my throat destroyed, he told me he had known my number since I was ten, and I said *so it isn't real*, and he said *I did not say that*.

And I got up to go. And at the door I turned round and I said:

Who told you to call me that?

And he did not ask me what I meant.

* * *

He said: your grandfather.

He said: every year for as long as I have had this shop. He came down before it was light and he stood at the yard gate with the lamp, and after seventy-three at the other one, and afterwards he sat in this shop and drank tea with me while it got light, because the first bus back up was at seven and because an old man does not go straight home from a thing like that.

He said: so he sat there. Where you are sitting.

He said: and he talked about you.

* * *

I said: about me.

And Haj Nemat, who was a butcher and a treasurer and a man who had run a boy at a hundred and twenty-nine beats a minute for six years, said the following, and this is the last thing in this book I am going to be able to write without stopping.

He said: he had his son's two boys and he was proud of both and he talked about the older one the way men talk about a boy who is

easy. Football. School. Girls, later. He talked about Amir the way you would talk about good weather.

He said: and then he would say, *and the little one*.

He said: and something happened to his face.

He said: he told me you would not smile at anything. He said it like it was the funniest thing in the world and he said it every year. He said, that child looks at me as though I have personally disappointed him and he is deciding how to break it to me.

He said: and he called you Bolor. In here. To me. To Sadegh. To men you have never met, who are still alive, who are in that yard tonight.

He said: for four years I have known the name of a child in the north of this city who never smiled.

And then he said: and then in Aban somebody came in and said Abbas Shabani was gone. Not from the family. From the family we heard nothing. From a man who drove a taxi.

He said: and I stood exactly where I am standing now.

And he said: and I thought, *the crystal*.

* * *

I want to be accurate about what that did to me, because it is the reason the next morning happened.

Everything I had been told that night — the chains, the front row, the fast that was not a fast, the four hundred and sixty-five thousandths of a second — all of it I had heard as a machine. I had been operated. That is what I understood at half past ten on the tenth night of Muharram: that I was a device that a butcher had learned to switch on.

And then at the door he said *the crystal*, and the whole thing turned over in one second.

Because the man who ran the machine had been sitting in a shop at seven in the morning for four years listening to my grandfather be

helplessly, stupidly, boringly in love with a child who would not smile at anything.

He had not been given a device.

He had been given the little one. The one the old man used to talk about after. He had been handed the thing that man loved most in the world on an afternoon in Aban when there was nothing else left to do about it, and he had put him at the front where he could see him and made the chain light so it would not hurt him and given him the only part in the whole story where a boy gets his hands on the thing he wants and puts it back.

And he had done it for six years and had never once said the name out loud, because the name belonged to a dead man and Nemat did not think it was his to use.

* * *

That is not a defence of him. He also filled a yard with me and paid Sadegh's rent with the takings and knew it and said so and did not apologise, and every word of that is true at the same time and does not cancel.

But I went out of that shop understanding, for the first time in my life, that the two things were not in competition.

He was using me and he loved me, in the same movement, with the same hands, and there was no seam in it anywhere, and there never had been, and there is not one in me either.

And at half past four the next morning I went into that storeroom and lifted the felt and took my grandfather's chain out of the bottom of the trunk, and I want to say now, at thirty-four, on the record, that I did not go to the green gate to hurt myself.

I went because a man in a shop had said a word out loud that nobody had said since I was nine, and I wanted, more than I have ever wanted anything before or since, to go to the one place on earth where my grandfather was still a person, and where my father, who had got one syllable of that word out in a doorway and stopped, had once been a boy.

43. THE PLAIN — the story will not stay where I put it

On the eleventh of Muharram the army left and took the captives and the heads, and the bodies were left in the open on the plain, and for three days nothing —

For three days nothing happened, because the men who had been there were reasonable men with families and shops and licences, and they stood in the yard and discussed it, and somebody said Tajrish, and somebody said which car —

No.

Start again.

On the eleventh of Muharram the army left, and a village called the Bani Asad waited three days until it was definitely over and then came out and did the decent thing, and they could not tell one man from another because of what had been done to the field, and so they buried seventy-two men without names and put a mark on it.

And the mark is a gold dome now.

And there is a bulb over the green gate and there is a drain in the middle and the ground slopes to it and the concrete around it is a paler colour where the hose reached and darker where it did not, in a shape like a hand with the fingers spread, and nobody has put a mark on it, and nobody is going to.

* * *

That is what happened to the story on the tenth night of Muharram in the year 1382.

I had been given it in order, one piece a night, for ten nights, the way it is given to every child in this country. Medina, the road, Karbala, the seventh, the ninth night with the lamp out, the river, the infant, the last hour, the horse, the road to Shaam.

And I had kept it in a separate drawer from my own life, which is what the drawer is for, which is the entire purpose of the drawer, which is why we have a story from thirteen hundred years ago instead of just crying about our own dead.

And on the tenth night the drawer came out of the front of the cabinet and everything went on the floor together.

I could not tell it any more without the alley in it.

I still cannot. I am thirty-four years old and I have told the story of Karbala to the woman I live with, in English, in a country where nobody knows what a heyat is, and when I got to the eleventh day I stopped in the middle of a sentence and had to say I would finish it tomorrow.

Every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala.

They put that on a banner and hang it over a street and everyone walks under it for a thousand years, and nobody, not one person, considers that it might be a threat.

PART SIX — THE STRANGERS

44. SHAAM-E GHARIBAN

There is no track any more. There is one night and it happened twice.

* * *

The word first, because everything is in the word.

Shaam is evening. It is also, spelled the same and said the same, the name of Damascus, which is the city they were marched to, and I do not think anybody planned that and I have never met an Iranian who has not noticed it.

Ghariban [*gha-ree-BAAN*] is the plural of *gharib*, and *gharib* is the word the whole thing turns on, and it does not translate. The dictionaries say *stranger*. That is not wrong and it is nowhere near enough.

A *gharib* is not somebody you do not know. A *gharib* is somebody who is far from their own people. It carries the whole apparatus underneath it: that a person alone is a person unprotected, that in the world this word comes from there was no such thing as an individual with rights, there was only a person with relatives, and that when you say a man died *gharib* you are not saying he died sad, you are saying he died with nobody obliged to come.

We use it for the exile. We use it for the migrant. We use it for the man buried in a country where the writing on the stone is in the wrong alphabet.

And on the night of the tenth of Muharram, we use it for a group of women and children sitting on burnt ground in the dark with every man they were related to lying unburied within a hundred metres of them.

The evening of the strangers.

* * *

Here is what that night was.

By late afternoon on the tenth it was finished. The army had taken the heads. They rode the horses over the field. Then, because a

camp is loot, they went through the tents — and this is the part that is always told quickly and should not be — they took the cloth off the women's backs. Not as an assault, as an inventory. They took earrings out of ears. There is a line in the old accounts about a soldier crying while he robbed a child, which is either the truest sentence in the whole of it or somebody's late addition, and I have never been able to decide, and I am not sure it matters.

Then they set the tents on fire and left, and the survivors ran out of the burning into open ground, in the dark, in October, on a plain.

Around fifty children. Some women. One man, Zayn al-Abidin, with a fever, unable to stand, dragged out because Zaynab stood in the way.

No tents. No water — still no water, that had not changed, the river was still there and still not theirs. No men. And the field they were sitting in the middle of was not a field any more, it was where everyone they knew was lying.

And the tradition preserves what Zaynab did, and it is not a speech, and it is not brave, and it is the reason this night is different from every other night of the ten.

She counted them.

In the dark, by touch. Going from child to child, putting a hand on a head, saying a name and waiting for an answer. Because the fire had scattered them and the horses had scattered them and she did not know how many she had.

Some of the names did not answer. She had to go and find those.

* * *

And there is one more, and every Iranian knows it and it is the single hardest thing in our entire year.

There was a small girl. The books give her name differently and mostly she is called Roqayyeh and she was three or four years old.

She had not been told. Nobody had had the time to tell her, or nobody could.

So she went across that ground in the dark, on the night of the tenth, from one body to another, looking for her father.

That is the story. That is all of it. It is four seconds long and it has held a country for thirteen hundred years.

* * *

Now the other night.

By eight o'clock the yard is unrecognisable.

They take the bulbs out. Not switch off — take out, unscrew, so nobody can put them on again by reaching for the wrong thing. The generator is off and the silence where the generator was is the first thing you notice, because it has been running for ten days and you did not know you were hearing it.

The speakers are down. The microphone is coiled and put in the box. The delay unit is off and unplugged at the wall, and that detail, on that specific night, in that specific year, is going to matter to me for the rest of my life.

No dohol. No sanj. No zanjeer.

Nobody stands.

They roll the carpets out flat and everybody sits down on the ground, which is the first time in ten days that anyone has been below anyone else, and the yard that has been a formation for ten days becomes a room.

And then they bring the candles.

* * *

The children carry them. That is fixed. It is not that the children are permitted to, it is that it is theirs, and no adult takes it from them.

They come in through the gate holding them low in cupped hands against the wind, in a line, eighty or ninety small candles, and they set them down on the concrete and on the flat of the carpets and along the top of the wall and around the rim of the empty cauldrons.

Some of them float them. A shallow bowl of water with a candle in it, and the flame moves when anyone walks past.

And that is the light for the rest of the night. That is all of it. Six hundred people in a walled yard in the dark with ninety candles on the floor.

It looks like what it is meant to look like, which is a plain with fires on it and nobody left to guard them.

* * *

Nobody performs.

I need to be clear about how strange that is, after ten days. For ten days everything has had a shape. There has been a man with a microphone and a beat and a formation and a set of instructions for your body. And now there is a yard full of men sitting on the floor in the dark, and there is no beat, and there is nothing to do with your hands.

The old rowzeh-khan does not use the microphone because there is no microphone. He sits on the carpet like everybody else and he speaks at the volume of a man in a room, and the men at the back cannot hear him properly and nobody asks him to speak up.

He tells the counting. He tells the small girl.

And the yard comes apart in a way it has not come apart in ten nights, and it is completely different in kind from the other nights, and this is the thing I most want to explain to somebody who has never sat in it.

For ten nights, six hundred men weep *in time*. On the beat. In a rhythm, in a formation, striking their own chests in unison, and there is something in that which is almost comfortable, because a grief with a tempo is a grief that is being managed. You are not falling. You are being carried.

On Shaam-e Ghariban [shaam-eh gha-ree-BAAN] there is no tempo.

And so what you hear in that yard is six hundred men crying out of time with each other, and it is a horrible sound, and it is the truest sound I have ever heard human beings make.

* * *

Here is what is actually happening in that yard, and this is the part that is never said out loud, and it is the reason this night is the one Iranians come back for even when they have stopped coming back for anything else.

Nobody there is crying about a plain in Iraq.

I said that earlier, in a different chapter, about a different night, and I was guessing. On Shaam-e Ghariban it is not a guess, it is the design.

This is the night the country puts its own dead down on the floor.

Look at what is in front of you. A dark yard, no music, candles set on the ground, everyone sitting, everyone allowed to weep as long and as loudly and as badly as they like, and nobody permitted to comment. There is no other occasion in our lives that provides this. A funeral is three days and then you are supposed to manage. A grave is a place you go alone. Here is one night a year, guaranteed, in the calendar, where a grown man in a country that does not allow grown men very much can sit on a carpet in the dark among six hundred people and cry about his own brother, and everybody will assume he is crying about a child on a plain in Iraq, and nobody will ever ask.

The story is the cover.

That is not cynicism. That is the engineering. The story is thirteen hundred years old and enormous and belongs to no one family, and because of that it is strong enough to carry every private death in the neighbourhood on top of it without anybody having to admit what they are carrying.

Every man in that yard has smuggled somebody in.

* * *

And it is much older than Islam, and Mehran told me this that night, sitting on the carpet beside me with a candle between his shoes, in a voice like a door in the wind.

He said: you know we were doing this before.

He said: there was a prince called Siavash [see-yaa-VASH]. Long before any of this. He was innocent — that is the whole of him, he is the innocent one — and he was accused of a thing he had not done, and he walked through a fire to prove it and came out the other side clean, and then they killed him anyway. In another country. Far from his own people. They put him down over a basin so as not to spill his blood on the ground, and where a drop got out anyway a plant came up.

He said: and the people of this country mourned him. Every year. With their faces cut and their hair cut and singing. Two thousand years ago there was a place in Bukhara [bo-khaa-RAA] where they did it and the historians wrote it down and complained about the noise.

He said: and then Karbala happened, and we already knew how to do this. We already had the movements. We had been rehearsing for a thousand years.

And then he said — and I would like it understood that this is a thirty-six-year-old man with ruined lungs sitting on the floor in the dark:

He said: Ali jan, we are the only people on earth who were ready.

* * *

I go and find Agha Sadegh at about eleven.

He is sitting with his back against the wall near the storeroom door, out of the candles, in the actual dark, which is where he has put himself.

I sit down next to him.

I say: it's the eleventh.

He looks at his watch, which he cannot read, and then at the sky.

He says: near enough.

* * *

And he tells me about Sohrab, and it is not the same story Mehran told me, because Mehran told me what happened and Agha Sadegh tells me what it was.

He says: he carried the alam six years. He was better at it than anyone I ever gave it to. He had a way of taking it down the carpet slowly enough that you thought he was going to stop.

He says: I gave him the light one too.

I say: what?

He says: the chains. Sohrab's was light. From the first year. I gave it to him for six years. Your grandfather's was not. Eleven years on a heavy one, before your father was born, and then I gave him the lamp.

And I sit there in the dark next to a man past eighty and I say: is anybody's chain heavy?

And Agha Sadegh laughs. Actually laughs, in the dark, on Shaam-e Ghariban, one small dry sound.

He says: about half. The other half are ones somebody was worried about.

* * *

Then he says the thing I came for and I did not have to ask.

He says: I am going to tell you why we all lied to you. Not Nemat. Nemat has his own reasons and he told you them tonight and I heard about it from three men before you sat down.

He says: I lied to you.

He says: when you told me about the alley on the seventh night, I knew exactly what you were describing before you had finished describing it, because I have been in that yard before dawn every year since before your father was born, and behind that green gate since seventy-three.

He says: and I put my hand on your neck and I told you it was Karbala.

And I say: why.

And he says:

Because you were fifteen, and you had just been shown, from the air, a thing that eleven grown men have not been able to look at directly in a year. And I had about two seconds. And in two seconds an old man reaches for the thing that has always worked.

He says: *every land is Karbala* is true. That is the terrible part. I did not tell you a lie. I told you the truest sentence we have, in order to stop you from asking a question, and that is a worse thing than lying and I have known it since the seventh night and I have not slept.

* * *

We sit there for a while.

Then he says, and this is the last thing anybody says to me before everything goes wrong:

He says: your grandfather's chain is still in the trunk. Bottom left, under the felt, with green tape on the grip.

He says: forty-odd years. I never gave it to anybody else.

He says: and if you go into that yard tomorrow, Ali, they will not stop you. That is what nobody has told you. They are not guarding it. There is no lock on it. There has never been a lock on any of it.

He says: the only thing standing between you and that gate for six years has been a lot of tired men making sure you were somewhere else.

* * *

The candles go down one by one over about two hours and nobody relights them and that is deliberate too.

By one in the morning there are maybe fifteen left. By two there are four.

Six hundred people sitting in a walled yard in south Tehran in the dark in winter, and nobody has spoken for a long time, and somewhere near the gate a woman is making a sound that I now know was Sohrab's mother, and every man in that yard knew it too, and not one of them turned round.

That is Shaam-e Ghariban.

Everyone knows. Nobody turns round. The candles go out on the floor.

And in the morning there is one more day.

45. THE NIGHT — the eleventh morning

The trunk is not locked. Agha Sadegh told me that and he was telling me something larger and I heard only the small thing.

I go into the storeroom at about half past four in the morning on the eleventh of Muharram and I lift the felt and the chains are in there in a heap like something asleep, and at the bottom on the left there is one with green tape wound round the grip, and the tape has gone hard and brown at the edges, and it comes away from the pile heavier than the others.

Substantially heavier. I had not understood how much until my hand took the weight of it and dropped four inches.

I stand in a dark storeroom holding a thing my grandfather used for eleven years and would not let anybody else use for forty, and I am fifteen years old and I have not been asleep and I have not eaten since the day before yesterday and there is a number in my head — four hundred and sixty-five thousandths of a second — going round like a wasp in a jar.

I do not take the chain to hit myself with. I want that understood, because everybody afterwards assumed that, and it is not what it was.

I took it because it was his, and because I was going to a place he had gone, and because at fifteen you do not go anywhere important empty-handed.

* * *

It is minus five. The banners are still up, and they will come down on the thirteenth, and for two more days they hang over a street where nothing is happening.

The alley has the bulb on. It has probably had the bulb on all night.

And the gate is open. Not ajar. Open, hooked back against the wall, the way you open a gate when men are going to be coming through it in ones and twos before dawn and you do not want the sound of a latch on a quiet street.

They are already in there. Nine of them. There is a hurricane lamp on the bench and the shrouds are down off the nails and three men have them on already, white, over the black, tied at the waist, and one of them is helping another one with the knot the way you help a man with a tie.

And they are talking quietly about something completely ordinary. That is the thing I did not expect and have never got over. About a road closure. Two men in shrouds at five in the morning discussing whether Navvab is shut.

* * *

The old man from the gate sees me first.

He says my grandfather's name. Not to me. Out loud, to the yard, like an announcement, like a warning at sea.

And every man in that yard turns round.

* * *

What happened next took about eleven seconds and I have had nineteen years to slow it down and it will not slow down.

I came in. I got about three metres. I had the chain in my right hand hanging down and I was not swinging it and I was not going to.

And they came at me. Not one. Four or five, at once, from both sides, and they did not shout, because the entire architecture of that yard is that nobody shouts.

A hand on my chest. A hand on the back of my collar. Somebody's forearm across me. And I did the thing a fifteen-year-old does when four grown men take hold of him, which is fight, badly, and I got an arm free.

The ground is concrete and it is wet because they had hosed it, because they hose it before as well as after, and it is minus five, and there is a film of ice on it in the places the light does not reach.

Three of us went down together.

And one of the men going down was one of the men in a shroud, and he had a qameh in his hand, because he had been holding it when he turned round, because he had been holding it the way you hold a spoon.

* * *

Nobody swung anything. I want that on the record, permanently, in a book, because for nineteen years people have looked at my hands and constructed something.

I went down forward with both hands out in front of me the way every human being on earth goes down.

And the blade was on the concrete between us, edge up, because it had come out of his hand when he fell.

That is all. That is the whole event. It is not a rite and it is not a punishment and it is not a martyrdom and it is not a suicide and it is not, in any way at all, interesting.

I put both palms down on a knife lying on the floor.

* * *

The left one is a diagonal across the fat of the palm below the thumb, about six centimetres, deep enough that I did not feel it for four or five seconds and then felt it in my teeth.

The right one goes across the base of all four fingers, which is worse, and which is why my right hand does what it does in cold weather.

Both hands, at once, in a yard, in the dark, during a prevention.

Abbas lost both arms carrying water to children who never got it.

I lost the use of two tendons falling over on a wet floor while being stopped from doing something I had not thought about for longer than ninety minutes.

That is the resemblance. That is what a resemblance is. It is the closest thing available.

46. THE NIGHT — the eleventh day

Nine men in a yard at five in the morning, all of them committing an offence, and a bleeding fifteen-year-old on the floor.

You already know the shape of this. You have already read what this room does.

* * *

They called it in eleven seconds.

The old man was the one. He said one word — a name, somebody's name, one of the younger ones — and then he said *car*, and then he said *now*, and the yard emptied of any discussion at all.

Two of them took the shrouds off and threw them over the wall into the next yard rather than spend two seconds folding them. Somebody put the *qameh* down a drain, and the drain is the drain, and I heard it hit.

Somebody wrapped my hands in a shroud, which is the only genuinely poetic thing that occurred that entire month and nobody in that yard noticed they were doing it.

And I was in a Paykan on the way to Loghman [logh-MAAN] with my hands up in the air over my head and a man I had never met in my life sitting beside me holding my wrists up and saying, over and over, in the tone of a man reading out a football result: *he fell on a knife in his uncle's kitchen. He fell on a knife in his uncle's kitchen. Say it back to me.*

I said it back to him.

I have said it back to a great many people since.

* * *

Fourteen stitches in the right, nine in the left. A tetanus injection. A doctor of about thirty who looked at my hands and then at my face and then at my hands, and asked me three times, in three different ways, each time more gently.

And on the third time he sent the man out of the room to do it.

And there was a gap of about two seconds before I answered him, and I know exactly what was in it, and I have never told anybody.

What was in it was Abbas.

Four hours. That is the interval. Four hours after a blade lying on a wet floor had opened both my hands during a scuffle that had no meaning of any kind, a man in a coat asked me a straight question in a well-lit room, and the first thing my mind reached for — before the truth, before the lie, before my mother, before anything — was a man in a river in Iraq with his arms gone.

I did not say it. I want that on the record. I have that much.

But I want it on the record too that it was still there, and that it was still the very first place I went, and that it was not even close.

That is what the thing does. It does not leave because you have found it out. Finding it out is nothing. I had known for eleven hours that the alley was concrete and that the number was a hundred and twenty-nine, and I lay on a trolley in Loghman with my hands in the air and reached for the desert anyway.

* * *

And I said: I fell on a knife in my uncle's kitchen.

And he looked at me for a while and then wrote it down.

I have thought about him more than about almost anybody else in this story. He is the only person in the entire month who tried, straightforwardly, with no rite and no story and no thirteen hundred years behind him, to give me an exit. He had about ninety seconds and he used all of them.

And I looked at a man who was offering me a way out, and I refused it, and I did it in front of witnesses, in daylight, with the paper right there.

I did exactly what Abbas did. I would like to be able to say it felt the same.

* * *

Haj Nemat came at eleven in the morning.

He did not sit down. He stood at the end of the bed with his coat still on and his hands at his sides and he looked at the dressings for a long time.

And then he said: I have three things to tell you and then I am going to go, because if I stay I will say more than three.

He said: the first is that I am not sorry about the number. I am not going to stand here and be sorry about it. It fed people.

He said: the second is that I did not know Sohrab was going to die and I did not know your grandfather was going to go the way he went and both of those are things I say to myself at three in the morning and they are both true and neither of them helps.

And then he said the third one, and it took him a while to get to it, and he said it looking at the wall.

He said: why do you think I gave you Abbas.

I did not answer.

He said: I have been putting boys in that play for twenty-six years. Do you know what part I give a boy I am worried about? Not Ali Akbar. Not Qasim. Every boy in this neighbourhood wants Qasim because he gets to die at a wedding.

He said: I give him Abbas. Every time. Because Abbas is the only part in the entire story where a boy stands in front of four hundred people, gets his hands on the thing he wants most in the world, and puts it back.

He said: I have watched you rehearse putting it back for nine days.

He said: it was the best I had.

And then he went, because he had said three things.

* * *

Agha Sadegh died in the summer of that year. He was eighty-one. It was nothing to do with any of this.

The last thing he ever said to me was in the hospital corridor about a week after, and it was not profound, and I am going to put it here anyway because he was in a hurry and he was old and he said the true thing instead of the good one.

He said: I should have given you the heavy one.

I said: what?

He said: the first year. You were nine. I should have given you a heavy chain and let you find out what it costs, and you would have put it down after twenty minutes and you would have been a boy who tried it once.

He said: we made it easy for you for six years and then we were surprised you did not know it was hard.

47. THE PLAIN — Safar, and the road

The mourning does not stop on the tenth. That is the thing nobody outside tells you and the thing everybody inside forgets to mention.

Muharram is the first month. The next month is **Safar**. And the mourning runs on into it, and it does not finish until the fortieth day, which is called **Arba'een [ar-ba-EEN]**, which is simply the word for forty.

Forty days after Ashura, the survivors — Zaynab, and the sick son, and the children — are said to have come back through Karbala on their way home from Shaam, and to have stopped at the ground.

That is what is being marked. Not a death. A return to a place by the people who were dragged away from it.

Millions of people walk to it now. On foot, across Iraq, in a line that takes days. It is possibly the largest annual gathering of human

beings on the planet and almost nobody outside our part of the world has heard of it.

* * *

And *Safar*, the name of the month, is also a word.

It is one of those words that does two jobs in the same mouth and everyone knows it and nobody remarks on it. *Safar* is the second month of the Islamic year.

Safar also, in Persian and in Arabic, simply means **a journey**.

You mourn through Muharram. And then the month you go into, the month you are still mourning in, the month you are still not finished in, is called Journey.

They built the leaving into the calendar. Thirteen hundred years ago. It is the next thing after the tenth night and it always has been.

* * *

I left on the twenty-eighth of Ordibehesht [or-dee-be-HESHT], 1389, which is May of 2010, from Imam Khomeini airport at ten past four in the morning.

I was twenty-one.

Mehran was dead by then — the winter of 1387, and it was the lungs, and it took eleven days, and I was there for all eleven and I am not going to write about it here.

The paperwork took two and a half years and cost more than I have ever earned in a year since. There were affidavits. There was a sponsor. There was a lawyer in Vanak with a photograph of his son in a graduation gown.

There is one thing I had worked out by then and it is the only thing I took with me that was worth anything.

I had not stopped believing it. I want to be exact, because people in this country assume that a man who leaves a thing like that has seen through it, and I have never seen through it, and I do not expect to.

What I stopped doing was *locating* it.

That is the whole of what I learned, and it took six years and both hands. The story is not a map. It was never a map. There is no alley in it and no drain and no gate, and if you find one you have not been shown something, you have made an error, and the error will feel exactly like grace, every time, for the rest of your life.

It is a container. It is thirteen hundred years old and it is enormous and it belongs to nobody, and that is precisely why it can hold what will not go anywhere else — a brother, a marsh, a son, an old man with a lamp who at the end could not find the gate. It works. It has worked for a very long time on a very large number of people and I am not going to stand here and be clever about it.

The only rule is the one nobody says out loud, because nobody in that yard has ever needed to.

You must never once mistake the container for the address.

* * *

And I believed, on the twenty-eighth of Ordibehesht 1389, standing in that queue with a bag, that I had got myself out.

I want to be exact about that. I did not think I was lucky. I thought I had done it. I had spent six years being a boy that a street had arranged around itself and I thought that the one thing in my life that was mine, unmanaged, unassisted, chosen, was that I had put myself on a plane.

* * *

Haj Nemat came to the airport.

He did not say much. He never said much. He shook my hand — the right one, which by then closed about eighty per cent, and he took it carefully, the way everybody in that neighbourhood took it, without ever once mentioning why.

He gave me a plastic bag with bread in it, because that is what people do, and then he said, God protect you, and then he said one more thing.

He said: don't go to a heyat over there.

I laughed. I actually laughed at him, in an airport, at four in the morning.

I said: Haj Agha, they don't have heyats in California.

And he looked at me for a second too long.

And he said: they have everything everywhere.

* * *

There are, depending on how you count, somewhere between eleven and twenty places in greater Los Angeles where the ten nights are observed. Within a few years I knew where nine of them were, without ever once looking.

It took me eleven years to stand in one. On the tenth night, in August, at ninety-four degrees, at the back, in a country where nobody knew what my hands were.

I did not take a chain.

And that is where the second part of this starts.

* * *

But on the twenty-eighth of Ordibehesht 1389 I did not know any of that. I went through the gate and I found my seat and the plane went up over the city at about half past four, and Tehran at that hour from the air is orange and enormous and does not end.

And somewhere down in it, three streets from a bakery, there is an alley a metre and a half wide with a drain in the middle and a bulb over a green gate, and the concrete around the drain is a paler colour in a shape like a hand with the fingers spread.

And nobody has put a mark on it.

And in about eleven years, when I finally understand who paid the lawyer in Vanak, I am going to sit down on the floor of a kitchen in another country and understand that I did not leave.

I was moved.

The way you move a boy to the front of a procession.

Because you love him, and because it is the best you have, and because you have never once, in the entire arrangement, thought to ask.

* * *

There is a version of this I have never written down and I am going to write it down now, at the end, where it belongs, because a book that has spent forty-seven chapters telling you to be careful about what you locate should not stop being careful on its last page.

I cannot verify the inside of any of it.

The yard is verifiable. The chain is verifiable — there are men alive who counted it out. The alley is verifiable, and the drain is still there, and Sohrab Ayeneh is buried at Behesht-e Zahra [be-HESHT-e zah-RAA] in a row I have never stood in.

The going up is not.

Six years of it, ten nights a year, and there is not one person on this earth who saw anything happen to me. I stood in a row of four hundred men and I was, by every account including my own at the time, doing exactly what they were doing. Whatever came for me in the second hour came for me alone, in a body I was inside, and left no mark that was not put there with a blade.

* * *

And I know what kind of child I was.

I did not smile. I did not speak for six weeks. I chose the wrong team at seven at a table where everybody agreed, and I chose it because everybody agreed. I was a boy who was outside every single thing he was ever put into, and who was taken, once a year, from the age of nine, into a walled yard where four hundred men breathed on the same beat, and told that this was the one place where being taken out of yourself was not only permitted but was the entire point.

I would like somebody to tell me what a boy like that would build, given six years, a drum machine held at a hundred and twenty-nine, and permission.

I am not saying it did not happen. I have never once been able to make myself say that, and I have tried, in two languages, at four in the morning.

I am saying that the most frightening explanation available to me is not that a boy was shown an alley three streets away.

It is that a boy who had never in his life belonged to anything wanted it badly enough to grow the machinery himself, out of a chain and a beat and an old man's hand on the back of his neck — and got it right, and got it working, and it worked for six years, and it cost him both hands.

* * *

There is one more thing. My mother told me in 2019 and I have not known what to do with it since.

She said the file was open before Esfand.

She said it in passing, about paperwork, about how long these things take — the affidavits, the sponsor, the man in Vanak with his son's photograph on the wall — and she said it had all started the year before, while my father was still at the firm, because the two of them had decided, in a kitchen in Elahieh, without telling either of their sons, that neither of them was going to spend his life in that country.

Before the tenth night. Before the gameh on the floor. Before my hands.

Which would mean that the thing I have spent eighteen years understanding as a consequence was already in motion while I was still carrying tea at chin height, and that my leaving had nothing whatever to do with the yard, and everything to do with two people in the north of the city who loved me and were quietly, competently and expensively getting me out. The way you would.

* * *

I have never asked her to repeat it.

Both of those are true on the page, and I have never once got them to be true in the same head at the same time, and I have stopped expecting to.

GLOSSARY

Aban aa-BAAN — Persian. The eighth month of the Iranian solar year, late October to late November.

Agha aa-GHAA — Persian, *sir*. Placed before a man's given name. Not a rank and not quite a title — it is what you call a man you respect and see every week.

alam a-LAM — Arabic, *a sign or standard*. The battle standard carried in a mourning procession, usually brass or steel and topped with an open hand. Abbas carried the standard at Karbala, so the alam stands for Abbas.

aman a-MAAN — Arabic, *safety, quarter*. A written guarantee of protection. Shemr brought one to Karbala naming Abbas and his three full brothers, and Abbas refused it.

Arba'een ar-ba-EEN — Arabic, *fortieth*. The fortieth day after Ashura, marking the end of the mourning period. Millions walk to Karbala on foot for it.

Ashura aa-shoo-RAA — Arabic. from *'ashara*, ten. The tenth day of Muharram, on which Hossein was killed.

Ayeneh aa-yee-NEH — Persian, *mirror*. A family name.

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

Baba baa-BAA — Persian. Dad.

bay'at bey-AT — Arabic. *pledge of allegiance*, performed by placing one's hand into the hand of the man being pledged to. Yazid's demand for Hossein's bay'at begins the story.

Behesht-e Zahra be-HESHT-e zah-RAA — Persian, *the paradise of Zahra*. Tehran's great cemetery, south of the city, named for the Prophet's daughter.

Boloor bo-LOOR — Persian. *crystal*; the bright, light-catching kind, used of chandeliers and cut glass.

dabirestan da-bee-res-TAAN — Persian. Iranian high school, following *rahnamayi*.

dasteh das-TEH — Persian, *a bunch, a group held together*. A mourning procession.

Dayi daa-YEE — Persian. Mother's brother, and the form of address for one.

deeg DEEG — Persian. A very large cooking cauldron, used for communal votive food.

dohol do-HOL — Persian. A large double-headed drum carried in processions.

Esfand es-FAND — Persian. The twelfth and last month, late February to late March. The year turns at Nowruz.

Esteghlal es-tegh-LAAL — Persian, *independence*. One of Tehran's two great football clubs; blue. The historic rival of Persepolis.

Farvardin far-var-DEEN — Persian. The first month, late March to late April.

gharib gha-REEB — Arabic, *stranger*. Not someone unknown, but someone far from their own people and therefore unprotected — a person with nobody obliged to come. Feminine **ghariba** [gha-REE-beh]; plural **Ghariban** [gha-ree-BAAN].

gheimeh ghey-MEH — Persian. A stew of split peas, meat and dried lime, cooked in bulk and distributed during Muharram.

Haj HAAJ — Arabic. The title of a man who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, kept before his name for the rest of his life.

heyat hey-AT — Arabic, *a body, a shape, a form*. A neighbourhood mourning association: a street's grief organised into an institution, with a treasurer, a storeroom and a membership.

hoor HOOR — Arabic and Persian. The marshes of southern Iraq and south-western Iran.

hosseinieh ho-sey-nee-YEH — Persian. A hall built for the mourning of Hossein.

Hurr HERR — Arabic, *free*. The cavalry commander who blocked Hossein's road, and who changed sides on the morning of Ashura.

Karbala kar-ba-LAA — Arabic. The plain west of the Euphrates where Hossein was killed, and the city that grew on the place. The accounts have him repeating the name as he arrived: karb and bala, grief and affliction.

Khanom KHAA-nom — Persian, *madam*. Placed after a woman's given name.

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

Kufa KOO-feh — Arabic. The garrison city in Iraq that invited Hossein and then did not come out for him.

latmiyeh lat-mee-YEH — Arabic. from *latm*, to strike. The slow chest-beating section of a mourning night.

maddah mad-DAAH — Arabic. from *madh*, praise. The lead reciter who sings the elegies.

Majnoon maj-NOON — Arabic and Persian, *mad*, *possessed*. The name of the lover in the old poem of Majnoon and Leyli, and also of the marshland oilfield contested throughout the Iran-Iraq war.

mashk MASHK — Persian. A water carrier made from a whole sewn animal skin.

Medina me-DEE-na — Arabic. The city Hossein left, and the beginning of the road.

Mordad mor-DAAD — Persian. The fifth month, late July to late August.

Muharram mo-har-RAM — Arabic, *forbidden*. The first month of the Islamic year, one of four in which fighting was traditionally prohibited.

nakhl NAKHL — Persian, *palm tree*. A wooden bier carried in procession, shaped after the palm said to have borne a body.

nazr NAZR — Arabic, *a vow*. A private undertaking made to God, requiring no clergy, no witness and nobody's permission. **nazri** [naz-REE] is the food distributed in settlement of it, which may not be sold and may not be refused to anyone.

nowheh now-HEH — Arabic. from *nawh*, wailing; the cry of a dove. The sung lament of a mourning night, performed in call and response.

Nowruz now-ROOZ — Persian, *new day*. The Iranian new year, at the spring equinox, and the turn of the solar calendar.

Ordibehesht or-dee-be-HESHT — Persian. The second month, late April to late May.

pardeh par-DEH — Persian, *curtain*. A large painted narrative canvas showing the whole Karbala story, unrolled and revealed a section at a time by a travelling narrator.

Paykan pey-KAAN — Persian, *arrow*. The car built in Iran from the nineteen-sixties until 2005 and, for most of that time, the ordinary car of the country.

Persepolis per-se-PO-lis — Tehran's other great football club; red. Historically dominant in the south of the city and among the bazaar.

pesaram pe-sa-RAM — Persian, *my son*. What an old man calls a boy who is not his.

qameh gha-MEH — Persian. A short heavy single-edged blade. **qameh-zani** [gha-meh-za-NEE] is the practice of striking the scalp with it, formally forbidden in Iran in 1994.

qorbani ghor-baa-NEE — Arabic. from the root *q-r-b*, nearness. A sacrifice; literally an act of drawing close.

rahnamayi rah-na-maa-YEE — Persian. Iranian middle school, three years, ending at about fourteen.

rowzeh row-ZEH — Persian, *garden*. From *Rawzat al-shuhada*, “The Garden of the Martyrs,” written in Herat in 1502; the book’s title became the word for the telling of the Karbala story itself. Recited by a **rowzeh-khan** [row-zeh-KHAAN]. Women’s gatherings are **rowzeh-ye zananeh** [row-ZEH-ye za-naa-NEH].

sabil sa-BEEL — Arabic, *a road, a way*. A free water station set out in the street for whoever is passing.

Safar sa-FAR — Arabic. The second month of the Islamic year, through which the mourning continues. The same word means *a journey*.

sanj SANJ — Persian. Large hand cymbals used in processions.

Saqqa sagh-GHAA — Arabic, *water-carrier*. The title of Abbas, named after the errand he failed.

Sarasari sa-raa-sa-REE — Persian, *nationwide*. The examination formerly sat simultaneously by every third-year middle school student in Iran.

Shaam SHAAM — Arabic and Persian. Damascus, and also *evening*. **Shaam-e Ghariban** [shaam-eh gha-ree-BAAN], the evening of the strangers, is the night after Ashura.

shabih sha-BEEH — Arabic, *resembling*. **shabih-khani**, resemblance-reading, is the older and plainer name for the Karbala passion play.

Shahrivar shah-ree-VAR — Persian. The sixth month, late August to late September.

sharyan shar-YAAN — Arabic and Persian. Artery.

shoor SHOOR — Persian. *fervour, ardour*; also *salty*. The fast, driving final section of a mourning night.

sineh-zani see-neh-za-NEE — Persian. Rhythmic beating of the chest with the open hand.

sofreh sof-REH — Persian, *a cloth spread for eating*. A votive gathering dedicated to a particular figure, most often run by women in a private house.

takyeh tak-YEH — Arabic, *a leaning-place*. A building or enclosure used for mourning rites; the word was borrowed from Sufi usage.

Tasu'a taa-soo-AA — Arabic, *nine*. The ninth day of Muharram.

ta'ziyeh ta-zee-YEH — Arabic, *condolence*. The Iranian passion play re-enacting the events of Karbala. See *shabih*.

tumar too-MAAR — Persian, *a scroll*. The strip of paper from which performers in a ta'ziyeh read their lines aloud, so that nobody is mistaken for the person they represent.

zakir zaa-KER — Arabic, *one who mentions*. The second voice in a mourning recitation, repeating a name to hold the beat.

zanjeer zan-JEER — Persian, *chain*. **zanjeer-zani** [zan-jeer-za-NEE] is the practice of striking the back and shoulders with a cluster of blunt flat chains in time.

Zilhajjeh zel-haj-JEH — Arabic. The twelfth and last month of the Islamic year, the month of the pilgrimage. Muharram follows it directly.

Zoljanah zol-jah-NAAH — The horse of Hossein, which returned to the tents without him.

Mohammad mo-ham-MAD — the Prophet. **Fatemeh** [faa-te-MEH], his daughter. **Ali** [a-LEE], his cousin and Fatemeh's husband, the first Imam.

Hassan ha-SAN — their elder son, the second Imam.

Hossein ho-SEYN — their younger son, the third Imam, killed at Karbala in 680 at the age of fifty-six.

Zaynab ZEY-nab — Hossein's full sister. Survived, was taken captive, and testified in the courts of Kufa and Damascus.

Abbas ab-BAAS — Hossein's half-brother, standard-bearer, killed at the river with the waterskin pierced and no water drunk. Also called Abolfazl [a-bol-FAZL], father of virtue, which is the name a sofreh is held under.

Ali Akbar a-LEE AK-bar — Hossein's eldest son, eighteen. **Ali Asghar** [a-LEE AS-ghar], his infant son, six months old. *Akbar* means the greater, *Asghar* the smaller.

Zayn al-Abidin ZEYN al-aa-be-DEEN — Hossein's son, the fourth Imam; the only adult male survivor, spared because he was too ill to stand.

Qasim GHAA-sem — Hassan's son, Hossein's nephew, thirteen.

Rabab ra-BAAB — Ali Asghar's mother. **Roqayyeh** [ro-ghay-YEH] and **Sakineh** [sa-kee-NEH], small daughters of Hossein.

Yazid ya-ZEED — the caliph in Damascus. **Mo'aviyeh** [mo-aa-vee-YEH], his father and predecessor.

Ebn-e Ziad eb-ne zee-YAAD — governor of Kufa, who wrote the orders. **Omar son of Sa'd** [O-mar eb-ne SAAD], who commanded the field. **Shemr** [SHEMR], who brought the safe conduct and refused mercy. **Hormola** [hor-mo-LAA], who shot the infant.

Moslem ibn Aqil MOS-lem eb-ne a-GHEEL — Hossein's cousin, sent ahead to Kufa; abandoned in a single evening by eighteen thousand men who had pledged to him. **Tow'eh** [tow-EH], the woman who took him in.

Bani Asad BA-nee A-sad — the village that waited three days and then buried the dead.

Siavash see-yaa-VASH — the innocent prince of the *Shahnameh*, unjustly killed in a foreign country, mourned annually in Iran for centuries before Islam.

Tehran, the last month of winter. Ali Shabani is fifteen, the second son of a comfortable family in the north of the city. For six years he has taken a bus forty minutes south to a walled yard behind a butcher's shop, where he beats himself with a chain until he bleeds through his shirt. Nobody makes him go.

This year he has the part of Abbas — the man who reached the river at Karbala, filled a waterskin and would not drink, because there were children behind him who had none.

On the seventh night he goes out of his body, as he has every Muharram since he was nine, and this time it moves. He sees an alley: a man on the ground with his head lower than his feet, five or six men standing round him, and nobody kneeling.

The old men tell him he has been shown Karbala. Every land is Karbala. The alley is three streets from his uncle's door.

*'He was accurate about the wrong thing.
And so were we, for eleven minutes,
standing round him doing theology.'*



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