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No. 65



اتاق ساکت است

THE ROOM
IS
QUIET

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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The Unheard House

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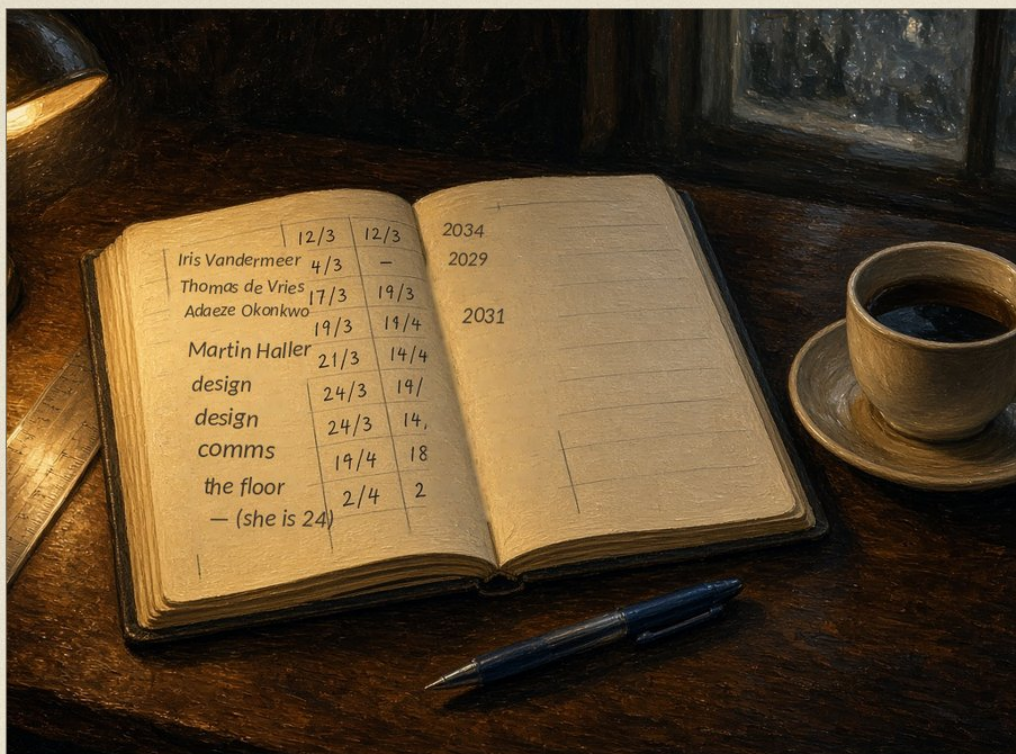
For Forough Farrokhzad

1934–1967

*who could look at a thing for as long as it took,
in a country that was not asking her to,
and never once turned her face away
to make the looking easier.*

THE FIFTH COLUMN

nine names, four dates, and one column she never filled in



The first column is a name. The second is the day they walked in.

The third is the day I saw it take.

The fourth is the day they will get through on their own.

There is nothing in the fifth column, and there is nobody I have told.

Nine people, two days a month, in a room she is paid four hundred euro a day to sit in. She is not running an experiment and nobody has asked her to keep a record. She rules the page in a hotel in Utrecht on the night of the second half of session five, with a ruler borrowed from reception, and does it badly. Four of the nine she names; the rest she enters by their trade, and the ninth she will not name at all because the woman is twenty-four. The fourth column is not mysticism — it is arithmetic, and it is not even difficult. The ones who get angry are quick, because anger treats the thing as an opponent and an opponent is something you can outlast. The ones who get sad are slow, because sadness means they believed it. She writes 2034 beside the name at the top of the page, knows it is optimistic, and does not change it — because changing it would mean writing a different number, and a different number is a different date, and then she would have to look at it.

SYNOPSIS

Rotterdam. Bahar Kamrani is forty, restores film for a living, and every evening at seven she sits down in a chair by the window and goes somewhere. She has done it since she was six, when her father taught her on the end of her bed and was proud of the phrasing. She assumed everybody had somewhere.

Then a company finds her. They have run attention tests on four hundred thousand people, and forty-one of them sit off the end of the instrument — not high, off the instrument — and every one of those forty-one traces back to a village outside Tabriz that was demolished in 1974 and is a weighbridge now.

They want to know how it is done. It is three sentences, and she gives them away in the third session, and they are almost useless: it takes years and it mostly fails. So the company asks the better question. Not what did those people do, but what was true about them that isn't true about us — and the answer is that their bodies had stopped interrupting them, and that this can be reproduced.

It can. It works. Nine people in ten reach it on their first afternoon.

And Bahar spends two years in that building explaining, honestly and at length, in quiet rooms, exactly why this must not be done — while nobody in the company is capable of paying attention long enough to notice what she is doing to them.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is a book about attention, which means it is a book about the only thing any of us actually spends.

The medical fact underneath the three novellas in this cycle is real and it is stranger than the folklore. Leprosy does not rot anybody. It kills the nerve, and the body stops sending word, and everything that follows — the ruined hands, the blindness, the shortened fingers — happens because a person could not be warned about ordinary life. It is a disease of not feeling.

And a body that has stopped reporting has also stopped interrupting.

That is the whole of what I have been writing about for three books, and I did not plan it. I went looking for a horror story and found an argument I could not answer, and the argument is this: every value the modern world holds about attention — look at what is in front of you, finish your own thought, stay in the room with somebody who is suffering — costs a nerve that none of us can afford to give up. We admire these things. We are not built to do them. Admiring a thing is what you do when you cannot do it.

The people in these books could do them, and paid for it with everything you can see.

I owe two debts and I want to name both.

The first is to Forough Farrokhzad, who went to a leprosy colony near Tabriz in 1962 and stayed twelve days and made twenty-two minutes of film out of it, at a time when nobody looked at those people and the official position of the civilised world was that they should be somewhere else. Everything in this cycle comes out of her method, which is stated more clearly in her work than anywhere else I know: decay is real, do not deny that it is real, and then look closely enough and for long enough and you may find that life is still occurring inside it. She never said the house was not black. She said do not look away while it is.

She was thirty-two when she died. The colony in these pages is not the one she filmed, the people are inventions, and the invention is deliberate — the real ones are owed better than being made into somebody's horror story.

The second debt is to Nizami Ganjavi, who took a commission he did not want in about 1188 and wrote Layli va Majnun out of a story he thought was too thin for a poem. The verses between these chapters are mine, written in his register, not translations of his lines; I have not reproduced a word of anybody's English version.

What I took from him is not the love story. It is the part nobody quotes. Late in the poem Majnun can have her — an army is raised for him, and later she is widowed and free — and he will not go. He has spent so many years in unbroken attention toward her absence that the woman herself has become an interruption. She would arrive, and be a person, and want things, and the thing he has built would end.

He fell in love with the quality of his own attention, and the beloved was a doorway.

I have not been able to decide, in eight hundred years of readers, whether that is the greatest love in literature or the loneliest thing ever written down, and I have given that question to a woman in Rotterdam and not helped her with it.

There is one more person in this book and he is the one I care about most.

Kian fits central heating, has three children, cannot sit still for two minutes and has never read a book to the end. He is the happiest person in these pages and the book does not condescend to him once, because he is right, and everybody else in it is wrong, and I could not find a way to defeat his argument and stopped trying.

The ordinary interrupted life is not the failure state. It is what almost everybody has. It is probably better.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

PART ONE — THE NOTICING

1 · Session One	13
2 · What I Have	16
3 · Session Two	18
4 · The Game	22
5 · Session Three	24
6 · Kian	27

PART TWO — THE INSTRUCTION

7 · Session Four	30
8 · What the Boredom Is	34
9 · Session Five, First Part	41
10 · What My Father Said	45
11 · Session Five, Second Part	46
12 · Mira	50

PART THREE — THE GROUND

13 · Session Six	54
14 · The Columns	57
15 · First Design Meeting	60
16 · Mehmān	62
17 · Design Meeting, Fourth Month	64
18 · The Weighbridge	67

PART FOUR — THE GARDEN

19 · Design Meeting, Seventh Month	71
20 · What Iris Did	74
21 · Bremen	77
22 · What I Am Doing to Nine People	80
23 · Design Meeting, Eleventh Month	82
24 · My Father, Second Visit	84

PART FIVE — THE PROTOCOL

25 · Capelle	88
26 · The Protocol	90
27 · What Iris Found	93
28 · What I Did Not Do	96
29 · Design Meeting, Final	98
30 · The Fourth Column	101

PART SIX — THE FILE

31 · Launch	105
32 · What Iris Did Next	107
33 · What I Have Been Doing	109
34 · Kian's Kitchen	111
35 · What Happens Now	113
36 · The File	115

PART ONE — THE NOTICING

1 • Session One

Session one of six. Recorded in a room on the fourth floor with the blinds half down. One hour and four minutes.

She begins by telling me I do not have to be here.

Her name is Iris Vandermeer and she is thirty-four and she has said this twice now — once in the email and once out loud, thirty seconds into the first recording of the first session. I say so. I tell her that it is the sort of thing people say when they are worried the other person will find out they should be worried.

She laughs. She has a good laugh and she uses it to get out of things.

Then she asks me what I do for work, which is the question you ask when you have decided to start somewhere harmless.

I tell her I restore film. Fourteen years at the institute on the Willemskade, mostly Dutch municipal material — parades, dredging, a great many mayors cutting things — and occasionally something good comes in. Before that, Ghent.

She asks whether I like it.

I say that I am suited to it.

She notices that this is not the same answer and says so, and I like her slightly better for it. Then she asks whether she can tell me why I am here, and says she would rather do that than dance around it, and I say please.

About a year ago, she says, their data team was cleaning up a research set. They run attention tasks — boring, standard, they measure how long a person can stay on a single thing before their focus breaks. Hundreds of thousands of people have done them. The results always look the same: a big lump in the middle, tailing off at both ends, exactly like every distribution of anything.

And there were forty-one people sitting off the end of it.

Not high, she says. Off the instrument. The test stops at a point they assumed nobody would ever reach, because in eleven years

nobody had, and forty-one people went through that point and kept going, and there were no numbers left to give them.

I ask whether I am one of them.

She says I am. I did the task in 2019 — it was bundled into something else, one of those free assessments, and she says I probably do not remember doing it.

I do not remember doing it. Almost nobody does, she says. That is rather the point of them.

I ask her how many of the forty-one know each other.

She stops. She wants to know why that is my first question, and I tell her the truth, which is that she has flown me here and put me in a good hotel to ask me about a test I do not remember taking, that she knows something about the forty-one, that she has decided to tell me in a particular order, and that I am asking her to skip to it.

She sits with that for a while. Then she does it.

Thirty-eight of the forty-one, she says, have a traceable connection to a single settlement outside Tabriz that was demolished in 1974 and no longer appears on any map. Twenty-nine are descended from people who lived in it. Nine married into that group. Two are the children of a man who was taken out of it as a child in 1946.

They do not know each other. Most have never heard of the place. Four of them, when the company made contact, assumed it was a scam.

And I am the only one of the forty-one who has, on record, in a public archive, requested the file on that settlement. I did it in 2011. I was twenty-nine.

She waits.

Then she says my name, and I tell her Bahar is fine, and she asks the question she has been carrying since before I arrived.

She asks what it is that we can do.

And I tell her the truth, which is nothing. We can sit still.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani, undated, first entry
She said *you people*.

She heard herself say it and she went the colour of a person who has stepped on something in the dark. She apologised twice, and the second apology was worse than the first, and I let her do both because I wanted to see how she managed embarrassment.

She manages it badly. That is worth knowing.

Here is what I could see across that table and did not say.

She has not slept properly in about three weeks. She is running on something — coffee, or the other thing, but I think coffee. Her left hand went to her phone four times in sixty-four minutes and each time she caught it on the way and put it back on her knee. She thinks nobody notices that. Everybody does it and nobody notices any of it, which is the whole of what my father taught me and I have never met a person it did not work on.

And twice — when she said *off the instrument*, and again when she said *demolished in 1974* — she stopped breathing for about a second and a half.

Not nerves. She was excited. This is the biggest thing that has happened to her.

I went back to the hotel and sat on the end of the bed for two hours without putting the light on.

I want to write down what I decided there, because I am going to lie to a great many people over the next year and I would like at least one true account to exist somewhere.

They have found it.

Not the technique. They have found the *people*, which nobody has ever done, because there was never a way to look. It took a company with four hundred thousand data points and a research budget, and it will take them about eighteen months to work out the rest of it on their own, with or without me.

So the question is not whether they get it.

The question is who is in the room while they do.



INTERLUDE

The First Letter

*They set the children down in rows to learn
the shapes of the letters and the way they turn.
He learned one letter only, all that year:
the first of her name. He held it near.*

The master struck his palm and called him slow. He was not slow.
He had somewhere to go.

There was a boy in a school in the desert country and his name was Qays. He was clever and he was watched and there was a great deal expected of him. And on the second morning a girl was brought into that school, and her name was Layli, which means the night, and he looked at her, and he did not look away again for the rest of his life.

That is the whole beginning. It is not complicated. It has been told for eight hundred years and nobody has improved it.

What is worth saying, and what people leave out, is that nothing happened. He did not speak to her. She did not speak to him. There was no meeting in a garden and no letter and no arrangement.

He simply attended to her, completely, without interruption, for the whole of a year — and by the end of that year he had lost the ability to attend to anything else, and the school sent him home, and his father wept.

2 · What I Have

I should set down what I actually am, because if I do not do it now I will start describing it the way she wants it described and I will not be able to get back.

I am forty. I restore film. I live alone in two rooms above a bicycle repair place on the Nieuwe Binnenweg and I have lived there since the divorce.

Every evening at about seven, and most afternoons if I am not working, I sit down and go to the garden.

There. That is the whole of it and it has taken me four years to be able to write that sentence without arranging it first.

The garden is dry. There is bare packed earth the colour of pale clay, swept smooth, hard underfoot, and nothing growing in it. There is a wall all the way round, mud brick, tea-coloured, higher than a man, and there is no gate in it anywhere. Down the middle of the garden there is a watercourse in a stone channel, narrow and straight, and the water in it is shallow and still and holds a flat grey sky.

I stand on the left, near the wall. I have never crossed the water.

At the far end there is one low tree with fruit on it. Pomegranate. It is the only living thing in that place and the only colour and I have never got closer to it — I have walked toward it for what felt like a long time and it stays exactly the same distance away, and I am not frightened by that and never have been.

There is somebody behind me. He is on my left, at about the height of a hand on a shoulder. He has been there since the first time. I have never turned round.

I want to be clear about that last part because everybody gets it wrong. I do not turn round because I am afraid of what is there. I do not turn round because turning round would end it, and I have nowhere else to be, and I have known this since I was six years old and could not have told you how I knew.

Until I was about thirty I assumed everybody had somewhere like this.

I mentioned it exactly once, to a man I was seeing in 2009, in a car, as small talk. He said: that's nice, mine's a beach. And we drove on. And I thought about that conversation for about eleven years before I understood what had been wrong with it.

His was a beach. He had made it up in the car, that afternoon, out of a holiday and a photograph, the way anybody would if you asked them to picture somewhere.

Mine is a real place with an inventory.

My father taught it to me. I was six. I could not settle to reading and he sat on the end of my bed and said — and I can still hear the exact shape of it —

Do not try to make yourself. Just sit, and let it get boring, and go through the boring, and there is something on the other side of the boring.

He was extremely pleased with the phrasing. I remember that. He said it the way you say a thing you have just thought of.

He had not just thought of it. He was thirty-two years old, he had been born in a leprosy colony in the province of Azerbaijan and taken out of it at five by a woman who is not my grandmother in any sense that matters, and he had been doing this every day of his life since before he could talk, and he did not know that either.

He gave it to me on the end of a bed in 1988 as a bedtime trick.

My brother Kian was one. He was in the next room. Nobody taught him anything, because by the time he was old enough my father had stopped doing bedtimes, and because Kian at four could not sit still for the length of a song.

Kian is thirty-five. He fits central heating. He has three children and a wife he is still in love with and he plays five-a-side on Thursdays with the same eleven men he has played with since he was nineteen.

He is the happiest person I know and I do not say that with any irony at all.

3 • Session Two

Session two of six. Fifty-eight minutes.

She wants to try something, she says, and I can say no.

She would like us both to sit still for four minutes. No phones, no talking. The camera stays on. She wants to do it with me rather than measure me doing it, because she has read the transcripts of the other three interviews and she thinks her people have been treating this like a lab and she does not think it is working.

I say all right.

She seems surprised that I have not asked why. I tell her she will tell me afterwards.

So we sit for four minutes.

At the end of it she does not say anything for a while. I ask whether she is all right and she asks me to give her a second and I tell her to take it.

Then she says that it was very unpleasant.

I say yes.

She apologises, and says it is embarrassing. She has done a hundred hours of guided sessions. She has the app on her phone — she has their *own* app on her phone. She did ten days in silence on a retreat in 2019. And she has just sat in a chair for four minutes and she wants to tell me that she has not been that uncomfortable in years.

I ask her what happened.

Nothing happened, she says. And then, after a moment: that is what was unpleasant.

I ask her to tell me what it was actually like. Properly. Not the version she would put in a report.

And she does, and this is the part I have thought about since.

At about twenty seconds she wanted to move, which she knew was normal, so she did not move and was quite pleased with herself. At about a minute she started composing — writing an email she is going to send this afternoon — and then noticed she was doing it and stopped, and then did it again with a different email.

At about two minutes she got frightened. Not of anything. There was no thought in it. Just a rising thing, she says, like when you have forgotten something and cannot remember what.

At about three she got angry. At me, a bit. At the chair.

And then it was over, and she has been sitting here for ninety seconds trying to work out why her eyes are wet.

I ask whether she wants to know what I think.

She does.

I tell her that I think that is the first four minutes she has spent alone with herself in about eleven years.

She says she has an hour on a train every morning.

I ask her what is in her hands on the train.

She does not answer that.

I tell her it is not a criticism. I am not being clever at her. She has never once in her adult life been in a room with only her own mind in it, and nobody has, and that is not a moral failing and it is not even modern — it is what a body does. You are being spoken to constantly by your own skin and you answer every single time and you have no idea you are doing it.

She asks whether I can turn that off.

I tell her no. God, no. I want to be very clear about that because it is the thing everybody gets wrong in the first week. Nobody turns anything off.

She asks what, then.

I tell her: I go through it.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

She cried on camera in session two and she has not asked for that section to be removed.

I have thought about that a great deal. She is not a fool and she is not sentimental. She left it in because it makes the file better, and she knows the file is the product, and somewhere underneath her sincerity — which is real, I have checked it four times now — she is a woman assembling an asset.

That is not a criticism. I am doing the same thing.

Two other things from today.

She said *the other three interviews*. So there are three more of us in this building, or there have been. She did not mean to say it and she did not notice that she had.

And when she talked about the retreat in 2019, she touched the inside of her left wrist with two fingers, twice, and stopped herself.

Her brother's name is Joost. He is twenty-six. She has not told me any of this and I have not asked and I am not going to.

There is a photograph on her desk, face down. It has been face down for both sessions. A person who does not want to look at a photograph puts it in a drawer. A person who wants you to ask about it stands it up. A person who is trying to do the first thing while a stranger is in the room does what she has done, which is to lay it flat and not think about it again.

I will not ask about it.

I am going to need her to trust me for eleven months.



INTERLUDE

The Name in the Street

*They wrote her name on walls, and it was cheap,
the way a thing is cheap that will not keep.
He wrote her name in verses. It was fine.
The verses ran the length of every line
of every street, and men who could not read
could say them. That was how the ruin was made:
not by a lie, and not by any greed —
by something beautiful, and well displayed.*

Here is the part that everybody skips.

Qays was a poet, and a real one, and what he wrote about Layli was genuinely good. It was so good that it travelled. Men recited it in the market who had never met either of them. It went from town to town in the mouths of strangers.

And that is what destroyed her.

Because a girl who has been written about in public, by name, cannot then be given to the man who wrote about her. It would look

like a reward. Her father would be a man who sold his daughter to a scandal.

So the poems, which were an act of love and were the best thing that boy ever did, closed the one door that was open.

Everybody applauded the poems. They are still applauding.

4 • The Game

There is a second thing my father gave me and it is not the sitting, and until this year I had never once thought of it as a thing at all.

He called it the game and we played it in cafés.

I would have been eight or nine. We would be somewhere with tables — the Beurs, or that place on the Mauritsweg that is a phone shop now — and he would order and then he would say, very quietly:

The man behind me. Don't look yet.

And I would wait, and then look, and then look away.

And he would say: what did he do with his hands before he answered her?

At first I could not do it at all. I would say something stupid — he had a cup, he was wearing a watch — and my father would nod and say *good*, and mean it, and then tell me what had actually happened. He put both hands flat on the table before he answered. He does that when he is about to say something he has decided in advance.

Or: she looked at the door twice while he was talking. Not at him. At the door.

Or, once, and I have never forgotten it: *he did not blink for the whole of that sentence. Nobody does that. That was a rehearsed sentence.*

I got better. I got quite good by about eleven and by fifteen I could do it faster than he could, and he was delighted, and stopped playing.

I want to say what I thought it was, because I thought it was a charming thing my father did, and I have described it at parties as evidence that he was an odd and rather wonderful man.

I know what it is now.

He restored film. He sat in a cold room and looked at one frame for eight hours at a time, and he built logs — he had a notebook with four hundred and six entries in it about a single film, and he found the thing that changed his life by tracking one woman's eyeline across eleven minutes of footage and noticing that it never once went where it should have.

And his mother, whom he never met and who died in 1968, came from a place where two hundred people sat down in pairs every evening at sundown and went over each other's feet with their eyes four inches away, because their own bodies had stopped telling them anything and somebody else's eyes were the only warning system left.

They scored it. They competed. A fresh stone in a shoe was nothing — anyone finds a fresh stone. A stone that had been in a shoe for nine days was a *result*, and it was held up, and it went round the pairs, and there was a sort of applause.

That is where the game comes from. It is four generations old and it has come down to me as a thing my dad did in cafés.

Here is what nobody understands about it, and it is not mystical and I want it written down flatly.

Everybody's attention breaks every few seconds. Everybody's. So nobody in the history of the world has ever watched another person continuously — you look, and something in you interrupts, and you come back, and you have missed the four seconds where the thing happened.

I do not get interrupted.

I can hold a face for fifty minutes. I have never had to learn it, in the way you have never had to learn to hear.

So I see the hand go to the phone and come back. I see the breath stop for a second and a half. I see which of two sentences

somebody chose, because there is a half-second before a chosen sentence where the face is doing arithmetic.

It is not a gift and it is not second sight and there is nothing supernatural about a single part of it. It is what forty years of uninterrupted looking does, and any one of the forty-one can probably do some version of it, and I have never once discussed it with anybody, including my brother, including my ex-husband, including the two people I have loved.

I have never told a living soul.

I am forty years old and I am sitting in a hotel in Utrecht writing this down for the first time, and I have just realised, in the middle of the paragraph, that I am not writing it down because I want to confess.

I am writing it down because I have started using it on her.

5 • Session Three

Session three of six. One hour and eleven minutes.

She says she wants to ask the obvious question and that she has been putting it off for two sessions.

I tell her to ask it.

She asks how it is done.

I tell her that if I tell her, she has it. There is no agreement on this. There is no patent. I could put it on the internet tonight and by Friday a million people would have it, and it would cost me nothing, and nothing would happen.

She waits, and then says: then tell me.

So I tell her.

Sit down. Let it get boring. Go through the boring.

She does not say anything for a long time. Then she says that that is it, and I say that is it, and she says — with real feeling, which I had not expected from her — that that is on a fridge magnet.

I say I know.

She asks whether that is the whole thing. Whether that is what forty-one people —

And I tell her that it is the whole thing. There is nothing else. There is no posture and no breathing and no mantra and no time of day. There is no teacher, there is no lineage to join, there is nobody to pay. It is three sentences and I have just given her all three and she has them for the rest of her life.

Then she asks the question that everybody asks, which is why, in that case, everybody cannot do it.

And I tell her: because you won't.

She says that is not an answer.

I tell her it is the only answer there is and it is the reason I have been putting off saying it. Try it, I say. Not once. Every day for a week, twenty minutes, and come back and tell me what happened.

She asks what will have happened.

Nothing, I say. Nothing will have happened, and you will be angry with me, and that is the correct result, and I cannot make it sound like anything other than a swindle.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

She will do it for six days.

She will do four days properly and two badly and on the seventh she will not do it at all, and she will come in next month angry — not at herself, at me — and she will have decided somewhere around day five that I am withholding the real technique.

That is not a guess. Everyone does this. Mehmān told me it in a kitchen in 2015 and he had watched about two hundred people do it by then.

What she will not be able to say, and what will be underneath the anger, is that on day three or four she got about eleven minutes in and something opened for a second and she did not like it.

Everybody meets that. It is the third thing and it is where the whole world stops.

I could tell her. I am not going to tell her, and I want to be honest in these pages about why, and the honest reason is not kindness.

If I explain the third thing to her now, she will look for it, and if you look for it you cannot get through it. It has to arrive as a wall you were not warned about. Everything I know about this says that the warning is what makes it impassable.

So I will let her fail for a month.

And there is a second reason and it is worse and I am putting it down because I said I would keep one true account.

An angry Iris asks better questions.



INTERLUDE

The Desert

They ask what the desert gave him. It gave nothing.

No water, no shade, no sign, no answering.

That is the gift, and they will not believe it:

a place with nothing in it, no way to leave it,

a man who stayed past the hour when leaving was sane —

and on the far side of nothing, he found her name.

When they would not give him Layli, Qays went out of the town and into the empty country, and he did not come back, and this is the part of the story that gets a picture in every edition: the thin man among the animals, with his hair grown out.

They stopped calling him Qays. They called him Majnun, which is not a name. It means possessed. It means a man with something else living in him.

And here is the thing that took me a long time to notice.

He did not go to the desert to suffer. There is not one line in the whole poem where he asks to be relieved of it.

He went because it was the only place with nothing in it.

6 • Kian

I drove out to my brother's on the Sunday between the third session and the fourth, because I had told nobody anything for eleven weeks and I was starting to feel it in my jaw.

He lives in Capelle in a house with a strip of grass at the front that he mows on Saturdays. There were three bicycles on their sides in it. There are always three bicycles on their sides in it.

Kian is thirty-five and looks about twenty-eight and has never in his life read a book to the end.

I want to be precise about how I mean that, because I have used that line at dinner parties for years and I have used it badly and I am not going to do it here.

He starts them. He starts about six a year. He gets forty pages in and something happens — the phone, the children, an idea about a boiler — and the book goes on the arm of the chair and stays there and eventually goes on a shelf. He is not ashamed of this. When I mentioned it once, years ago, in a tone I am not proud of, he said: *why would I finish it if I've stopped enjoying it?*

He has an answer for everything and about half of them are better than mine.

We sat in the garden. The middle one was doing something violent to a plastic tractor. Mira, who is nine, was inside.

I said I was doing some interviews for a company and could not say much about it, and Kian said: is it dodgy?

I said I did not know yet.

And he said, without any particular weight: *Dad would know.*

I said Dad won't talk about any of it.

And Kian said: *no, he'll talk. He just won't talk to you about it, because you go at him like it's a thing to solve. I asked him about the village once and he told me for about forty minutes.*

I said: what did he tell you?

And my brother said: *he told me about the bread.*

I sat in that garden with a can of something in my hand and I could not speak for a moment.

Nine years I have been asking that man questions and getting weather. Nine years. And Kian — who does not read, who cannot sit still, who has never wondered about any of it — asked once, badly, without an angle, and got forty minutes about the ovens and a woman called Golnaz who worked dough with two closed fists and could smell her own arm burning before she could see it.

He does not remember most of it. I made him try. He got about a third.

Then he said the thing that I have written on the inside cover of this notebook and that I look at most days now.

He said: *You know your problem? You're the only person I know who's never bored. And I don't think that's as good as you think it is.*

Then Mira came out and wanted him for something and he got up straight away, mid-sentence, without finishing the thought — the way he does, the way he has always done, the way I have quietly pitied him for since I was fifteen.

And she took his hand and he went.

PART TWO — THE INSTRUCTION

7 • Session Four

Session four of six. One hour and twenty-six minutes.

She has done it, she says.

I ask for how long, and she says every day for a week, twenty minutes. Then, after a beat, because she is honest and cannot help it: four days properly, two badly, and she did not do it on Sunday.

I say all right.

She asks whether I am not going to say anything about that. I tell her there is nothing to say — that is more than most people manage.

And then she tells me that nothing happened.

She is angry. She sat in a chair in her flat for twenty minutes a day for a week and she was bored and her back hurt and she thought about work and about her brother and about a woman at the gym who irritates her, and then the timer went, and that was it. Seven times. Nothing.

I say: good.

She tells me not to do that. She says I am doing the thing where the teacher says *good* and it means the student has correctly failed, and that she has been in rooms with that man before, at the retreat, and found him unbearable then, and does not want me to be him.

That is fair, and I say so, and I apologise.

She says she is being sharp with me and that it has been a bad month.

I ask her to ask me the question she actually came in with.

She takes a while. Then she asks whether I am holding something back.

I tell her no.

She says that from where she is sitting there are three possibilities. Either there is a piece I have not given her, or the thing does not exist, or it exists and is only available to people who were raised

into it before they could talk — and if it is the third, then the entire project is a waste of eleven months and about four hundred thousand euro and she needs to tell some people that.

I tell her it is mostly the third one, but not for the reason she thinks.

She asks me to say it plainly. She says she is too tired to be handled today.

So I ask her about day three or four.

She wants to know what about it.

And I tell her: something happened on day three or four. Ten, eleven minutes in. Not a vision, nothing dramatic. She got to a place she did not like and she came out of it — she did not decide to come out, she was simply out and moving and the twenty minutes were over and she was relieved, and she did not put that in the report she has just given me.

She is quiet for a long time. Then she asks how I know that.

I tell her that it happens to everybody, in the first week, at about eleven minutes, and that there are four things and that is the third one, and it is where the entire world stops. Not most people. The world. That is the wall and she hit it on day three like every human being who has ever tried this.

She asks why I did not warn her.

Because if I warn you, I say, you look for it. And if you look for it you cannot get through it.

She says that is convenient.

I tell her it is monstrously convenient, and it is also true, and I have no way to prove it to her, and I understand exactly how that sounds.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

She was angry for the first thirty minutes and then she was not angry, and the change happened at the point where I said *the world*.

There is a thing that happens to people at that sentence and I have seen it perhaps twenty times. They have spent the week believing they failed at something everybody else can do. When you tell them that nobody can do it — that the wall is not personal, that it is standard equipment, that a monk who has been at it for forty years still meets it and simply knows what it is — something in the shoulders comes down.

I have never in my life had that experience and I do not know what it feels like.

That is worth writing down. I have never been on the outside of this. I have never once wanted to and been unable. I got given it before I had language and I have no memory of not having it, and so I am the worst possible person to teach it, and I have known that since Mehmān told me so in 2015.

He said: *you are a native speaker trying to explain grammar. Go away and learn a second language and then come back.*

I did not go away. I have never learned anything.

Second thing, and I need to record it because it is the first time.

At about forty minutes she said: *my brother did the ten-day retreat with me.*

She did not mean to. She heard it happen. And then she carried on talking for another four sentences at slightly increased speed, which is what people do when they want a thing not to have been said.

Joost. Twenty-six. Cannot finish anything, cannot hold a job, has been to two clinics. He is the reason she took this job.

I know all of that and I have known it since session two and she has told me none of it.

Here is what I want on the record.

I did not go looking. I want that clear because I can see how these pages will read one day. I did not investigate her and I have never searched for a single thing about her private life.

I simply sat opposite a woman for four sessions and did not get interrupted, and she told me all of it without opening her mouth, the way everybody does.

And today I chose not to use it. She gave me an opening — she was tired and sad and she wanted to talk about him — and if I had said *tell me about your brother* she would have told me everything and she would have trusted me completely by the end of it.

I did not do it.

I want the record to show that I did not do it in session four.



INTERLUDE

The Father

*His father took him by both hands and said:
the girl is one girl. There are girls. Instead
come home, and eat, and let this thing be old,
and in a year you will have gone quite cold
on all of it, and laugh, and be a man.*

And Majnun said: I know. That is the plan you have. I have looked at it and I am sure you are entirely right. I would prefer to stay.

This is the exchange that people find hardest, and it is the one I would put in front of anybody who wants to understand what this poem is actually about.

His father is not a fool. His father is not cruel. Everything the man says is correct and kind and would work.

And the boy does not argue with him. He does not defend himself. He agrees with every word — and stays where he is.

That is not madness. Madness would be easier. He has weighed a good life against the thing he has, and he has chosen, and he is not confused.

8 • What the Boredom Is

I am going to do something slightly unfair in this chapter and I want to say so at the top, because the alternative is doing it without telling you.

Everybody who writes about this describes the end of it. The end is easy to describe and it is pleasant to read and it sells a great many books. Nobody describes the middle. The middle is where every single person is, and it is where every single person stops, and the reason nobody describes it is that a truthful description of it is boring to read.

So I am going to write the truthful description anyway.

I sat for twenty minutes on the eleventh of March in the chair by the window in my flat, and afterwards, immediately, before I made tea or looked at anything, I wrote down everything I could recover of what had actually gone through my head. It is not exact. Nothing like this is ever exact; the recovering changes it. But it is not tidied, and I have not removed the stupid parts, and the stupid parts are most of it.

* * *

THE FIRST THING. It wants to move.

0:00 — 0:20. Sitting down. Adjusting. Adjusting again. The chair is slightly too deep and it always has been.

0:20. Left shoulder. Not pain. An awareness that a shoulder is there, presented as though it were urgent.

0:26. The shoulder again.

0:31. Something at the back of the neck, at the hairline. Almost certainly nothing. There is a specific quality to these — they arrive with a little flare of importance, as though a message has come in, and if you do not answer they repeat.

0:34. Neck again.

0:38. Left ankle, which is crossed under the other one and would be more comfortable if it were not.

0:41. Neck.

0:47. Shoulder.

0:52. Swallowing. I have become aware of swallowing. Once you have become aware of swallowing you will be aware of it for several minutes and it will feel as though you have forgotten how to do it.

1:04. Neck. Ankle. A thought about whether the window is open.

Everybody expects this part. It is in every book on the subject and it takes up most of the space in them, and it is the least of it. It lasts about ninety seconds and it is not difficult; it is only loud. You do not move, and it goes on asking, and then it gets tired.

I would guess you skimmed some of that.

I would like you to notice that you did, and to notice that it was not a decision. Something in you assessed the density of information in those lines, found it low, and moved your eye. That is the same mechanism, in a different room, and you cannot switch it off any more than I can.

* * *

THE SECOND THING. It negotiates.

1:30 — 4:00. This is where the mind gets clever, and it is charming, and I am fond of it.

1:36. I should do this in the mornings.

1:41. Really the correct time for this is first thing, before anything else, and the reason it is not working especially well today is that it is the middle of the afternoon and I have already had a day.

1:52. Starting tomorrow: mornings.

2:10. I could do the mornings and also keep this slot, and then it would be twice a day, which over a month is a considerable amount.

2:18. A brief and entirely sincere plan for a better chair.

2:29. Where you would buy such a chair.

2:44. Whether the money for the chair should instead go toward the boiler.

2:51. The boiler.

3:02. The man who came about the boiler, and his opinion of the boiler, and whether his opinion was honest.

3:15. Noticing that I have been thinking about a boiler. Coming back.

3:16. Pleased with myself for coming back.

3:24. The pleasure at having come back is itself a thing to think about, and I think about it, and then about the fact that I am thinking about it, and this can go three or four floors down and is a very comfortable staircase.

3:50. Mornings, though. Genuinely.

The second thing does not feel like avoidance. That is what makes it good. It arrives dressed as planning, and every plan it offers is sensible and would improve matters, and there is always a better version of this available, starting shortly.

Nothing in the second thing is a lie. That is why nobody catches it.

* * *

THE THIRD THING. This is where the world stops.

It came at about eleven minutes. It comes at somewhere between eight and fourteen for most people, and it came at eleven for me, and I have had it at eleven since I was a child.

I am going to put down what it was actually like and then I am going to say what it is, and I would ask you to read the first part before the second.

10:58. A settling. Not peace — a flattening.

11:14. And then: this is pointless.

Not a mood. Not a wave of sadness. There is no content in it at all — it is not about anything, there is no image, no memory, nothing has gone wrong. It is a bare, level, entirely reasonable-sounding

proposition, delivered in my own voice, in the same tone I would use to observe that the milk has turned.

This is pointless.

11:21. You are forty years old and you are sitting in a chair.

11:29. You have done this most days since you were six. Add it up. Something like eleven thousand hours. What is it for. Name one thing.

11:40. You could not name one thing.

11:44. There are people downstairs. There are people in this city doing things.

11:52. The marriage.

That is the only one with any content in it and it lasted about four seconds and it was not even an argument, just the fact of it, laid on the table like an object.

12:03. This is pointless.

12:11. This is pointless and everybody who does this is pretending and you are the worst of them because you were told to at six and never once checked.

12:20. Get up.

12:26. Get up. There is no reason to be here. Nothing is going to happen. Nothing has ever happened. You have made a life out of sitting in a chair and calling it a discipline and it is a habit, it is a *tic*, and you would see that immediately if you got up and did something.

12:34. Get up.

I did not get up.

I want to be clear that not getting up is not heroic and it does not feel like resolve. It is nearer to being too tired to obey.

12:40. Get up.

12:55. This is pointless.

13:10. — and so on. It went on until about fifteen minutes, so a little under four, which is about standard.

* * *

Now. Here is what that is.

It is not true. It presents as a realisation. It arrives with the exact flavour of seeing clearly — that particular cold, clean, slightly bracing feeling of having stopped kidding yourself. That is the whole of its power and it is why it wins. It does not feel like a stage of a process. It feels like the moment you woke up.

So when somebody gets up out of the chair at eleven minutes on day three, they do not experience it as quitting. They experience it as having come to their senses. They walk out of the room mildly relieved, with the sense of having narrowly avoided being a fool, and they will tell you afterwards, honestly, that they tried it and nothing happened.

Iris did this on day three. She did not tell me. Nobody ever tells anybody, because there is nothing to tell — from the inside, nothing happened, and the account is accurate.

It lasts about four minutes. Four. If you remain in a chair — not fighting it, not answering it, not arguing that your life has meaning, simply sitting there while a very reasonable voice explains that you are wasting it — it thins, and it goes, and it does not come back that afternoon.

Four minutes.

Almost no one in the history of the species has done that, and the reason is not weakness. The reason is that nobody has ever been told that it is four minutes long. Everybody who meets it believes they have met the truth about themselves, and you do not sit still and wait out the truth about yourself. You get up and put the kettle on.

* * *

THE FOURTH THING.

There is no name for it in any language I have. I asked Mehmān and he said there was no word, and that the House had no word either, which is remarkable in a place that had a word for everything, including a joke word for the thing that stands behind you. They called it the quiet. My father never named it once in his life.

It is not peace. Peace is a feeling and this is not a feeling.

It is not pleasure, or bliss, or warmth, and no light arrives, and nothing comes, and it is not the presence of anything.

The nearest I have ever got is this: *it is the sensation of a room going quiet after somebody who has been talking for forty years leaves it.*

You do not notice it happen. There is no threshold and no arrival. You are in the third thing, being told in your own voice that you are a fool, and then at some later point you notice that you are somewhere and have been for a while — in the way you notice you have read the same line four times and cannot say when you stopped.

And then there is a garden.

That is all I am going to write about the fourth thing, and I want to say why, because the shortness of that section is going to look like coyness and it is not.

Everything anybody has ever written about the fourth thing has made it sound worth having. That is the problem. It reads as a prize at the end of a corridor, and so people go down the corridor looking for a prize, and looking for it is the one thing that guarantees you cannot get through the third stage, because the third stage is precisely the collapse of the belief that there is anything at the end.

You cannot beat the third thing by wanting the fourth thing more.

You beat it — and I use that word badly, nobody beats anything — by sitting in a chair for four minutes without any expectation whatever, which is the same as saying: you get there by not going.

I have no better instruction than that and neither has anybody in eight hundred years.

* * *

One more thing, which is not a stage, and which I have to put somewhere.

We have abolished the doorway.

Every one of those four stages used to happen in a queue.

That is where the human race met this. Not in retreats and not on cushions — in a bus stop, in a waiting room, in the twenty minutes before somebody arrives, on a train with nothing to read, on a bad Sunday afternoon in February with the light going at four. Nobody sought it out. It was simply the empty part of an ordinary week, and it was unavoidable, and everybody in every generation went through the first thing and the second thing constantly, without naming them, and a certain number of people every century went further and had no vocabulary for it and mostly said nothing.

There is no queue now.

There is no bus stop, no waiting room, no train, no bad Sunday. Every single one of those gaps has been filled, and filled with something genuinely pleasant, by people who were not malicious and who sincerely believed they were removing a nuisance. They were removing a nuisance. That is exactly what they were doing and they did it very well.

My niece is nine years old and has never once in her life stood in front of the first thing with nothing in her hand.

I am not writing a newspaper column and I am not nostalgic for buses. The door has not been destroyed. It is exactly where it always was, in every chair in every room, and it costs nothing, and the instruction is three sentences long.

Nobody walks past it any more, and so nobody ever finds it by accident, and finding it by accident was how everybody used to find it.

* * *

And now I would like to point out that you have just spent nine or ten minutes reading a chapter about tedium, and that somewhere in the middle of it — probably during the second thing, most people say the second thing — you became aware of the length of it and wanted it to move along.

You did not decide that. Something in you assessed and adjusted and you were not consulted.

I could have written this chapter shorter. I have written it four times and the short version is better prose and it does not work, because the short version lets you read *about* the second thing without meeting it, and reading about it is worth nothing at all. It is like reading about a language.

That impatience you had, about six paragraphs ago, in a comfortable chair, with a book you chose, in a room where nothing was being asked of you —

that is the smallest possible dose of the thing that has stopped every human being who has ever tried this.

And it is the first stage. Not the second, and nowhere near the third.

9 • Session Five, First Part

Session five of six, first part. Forty-seven minutes.

She tells me at the start that some other people will be joining for the second half, and that she should have said so in the email. Two from research, one from legal.

I ask why legal.

She takes a moment and then says: because of what I am going to ask you in the second half.

So I tell her to ask it now, while it is the two of us, and then ask it again in front of them.

She agrees, and I can see her rearrange the afternoon in about four seconds.

Then she says this.

They have been working on the assumption that this is a technique. That is what the whole project has been — find the technique, describe it, teach it, put it in the product. And I have given her the technique, and it is three sentences, and it does not work. Or rather it works over a decade in about one person in fifty, which commercially is the same as not working.

So they have stopped asking how it is done.

I ask what they are asking instead.

They are asking what the *conditions* were, she says. Not what those people did. What was true about them that is not true about us.

I tell her to go on.

They had a disease, she says, that killed the nerves in the skin. And that is not a side detail, is it. Their bodies stopped sending signal. All those small constant interruptions that she and I get every few seconds — an itch, a shift, a knee, a sleeve, a temperature — those people did not get them. Not because they were disciplined. Because the wire was dead.

I tell her that is right.

So they were not better at not being interrupted, she says.

No. They were not interrupted.

She sits with that. And that is the whole thing, she says.

That is the whole thing.

And every one of the forty-one is descended from them but does not have the disease, and gets it thinly, over years, because we have the habit without the condition.

Yes.

Then she says she wants me to hear the next question properly, and that nobody in this building is a monster.

I tell her to ask it.

She asks what if they could reproduce the condition.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

There. Eleven weeks, four hundred thousand euro and a great deal of decency, and there it is, and it took them a fifth of the time I expected.

I want to set down exactly what she is proposing because when I read this in ten years I will want to know whether I understood it correctly on the day.

Nobody is proposing a disease. Nobody is proposing damage. She was very clear about that and I believe her.

They are proposing to quiet the peripheral signal — the small constant traffic from the skin — temporarily, reversibly, under supervision, for something like ninety minutes. She said the word *reversible* four times in nine minutes.

I do not know whether it can be done. She thinks it probably can, within some number of years, and she is better placed to know than I am.

And here is the thing I have to write down and would rather not.

It would work.

Not partially. It would work completely and immediately and for anybody. Take away the interruptions for ninety minutes and a person walks into the fourth thing on the first afternoon, without the decade, without the boredom, without the wall on day three. They would arrive somewhere it took my great-grandmother a bad winter and eleven deaths to find.

I sat in that chair and I could not think of one argument.

Not a medical one — it is reversible, or they say it is, and consent is real and the room is supervised.

Not a moral one, because what exactly is my objection? That it was hard for us? That is not an argument, it is a grievance, and it is the oldest and least respectable one there is.

I said nothing for about six seconds, which is a very long time, and Iris did not fill it, because she has learned that from me over five sessions and I taught her deliberately.

And what I felt underneath all of it, in my chest, and what I am going to write here once and never say to a living soul, is that I did not want them to have it.

Not: it is dangerous. Not: it will hurt somebody.

I did not want them to have it.

That is not a moral position. That is a woman who has one thing, watching a company offer it to everybody for a monthly fee, and finding out what she is.



INTERLUDE

Nawfal's Army

*Nawfal came with horses and with men
and said: I will take her and give her to you then.
A hundred spears. A morning's work. A wall
that would come down. And Majnun, at the call,
looked at the army and looked at the sand
and asked him, quietly, to disband.*

They said: he is mad. They were nearly right. He had built a room and lived in it. The light in that room was better than any light outside. A door was offered. He declined, and stayed, and died.

Nawfal is a warlord who takes pity on him. He is not a villain either. He raises a force, he fights her tribe, he wins — and he comes back to the desert to tell the boy that it is done, that the way is clear, that he can go and get her.

And Majnun will not go.

The poem gives various reasons and none of them are convincing and I think that is deliberate. What is actually happening is simpler and much worse, and Nizami is far too good a poet to say it outright.

By that point in his life, Layli would be an interruption.

She would arrive, and be a person, and want things, and have opinions about where they lived. And the thing he has built out of eleven years of unbroken attention toward her absence would end.

He does not love her less. He loves something else more, and it is made out of her, and she is the one thing that could destroy it.

10 • What My Father Said

I drove to Dordrecht on the Saturday and asked my father a direct question for the first time in about nine years.

His name is Dariush. A woman gave it to him out of a book in 1962, in a car, on the way out of a country, because the name he had was not a name and could not be written on a form. He is sixty-six. He lives in a flat with too many books and a view of a car park and he still restores film two days a week because the institute cannot get anybody else who will do it properly.

I did not go at him. That is what Kian said I always do and Kian was right and it has taken me four months to admit it.

I sat in his kitchen and I said: a company has found forty-one of us and they want to know how it works and I think I am going to help them.

And my father said: is the tea all right?

I said the tea was fine.

He said: they will not manage it.

I said they might.

And he said — and this is verbatim, I wrote it in the car —

Bahar jan, in 1996 I found a patch on my arm that had stopped reporting to me and I did not go to a doctor. I went upstairs to a cold room and sat in front of a film for eleven months. That is not a decision anybody makes. I have had twenty-six years to work out why I did it and the best I have is that I was obedient to something I could not name.

They will find the mechanism. They are clever and they have money. And then they will sell it, and people will buy it, and it will work, and it will not do what they think.

I asked what he meant.

And he said: *because the point was never the quiet.*

And I said: then what was it?

And my father, who has answered every question I have put to him for nine years with a remark about the weather, put his cup down with two hands, flat, the way he does, the way his mother's people did in a yard in Azerbaijan because a hand that cannot feel cannot catch —

and he said: *ask me the other question.*

I said: what other question?

He said: *the one you came for. Not the one about the company.*

And I could not do it. I sat in my father's kitchen at forty years old and I could not ask him whether he was all right, or whether he had ever been, or whether the thing he had given me on the end of a bed in 1988 was a present or a delivery.

So I asked about the bread instead. Kian's question.

And he talked for fifty minutes.

The ovens, and the flour that came up on a Tuesday, and Golnaz with her two closed fists who could smell her own arm cooking before she could see it and was proud of it, and the boys gambling aluminium tokens against the school wall, and a wedding where a man with no fingers played the drum with the flats of both hands and was the best musician in the province.

He laughed twice. I have not heard my father laugh twice in an afternoon since I was a child.

And at the door, with my coat on, he said the only other thing he has ever said to me about any of it.

He said: *whatever they build, they will not be able to build the wedding.*

11 • Session Five, Second Part

Session five of six, second part. One hour and fifty-two minutes.

Present: Vandermeer; De Vries and Okonkwo from research; Haller from legal.

Haller goes first and puts it on the record that I am under no obligation, that I am not an employee, that nothing I say here

creates a duty, that I am a research participant and can stop at any time.

I say I understand.

De Vries asks whether he can put the proposition and have me tell him where it is wrong.

Sustained attention breaks, he says, because of the constant low-level reporting from the body — the traffic from the skin and from inside. In my population that traffic was absent for pathological reasons. The practice I describe is a way of *tolerating* that traffic rather than removing it, and it is inefficient, which is why it takes years and mostly fails.

I tell him that is roughly right.

So if the traffic were attenuated temporarily and safely, he says, the practice becomes unnecessary. You get the state directly.

Yes.

Then the question, he says, is whether the state has value independent of the route to it. And he wants to ask me that directly, because I am the only person they have who has actually been there.

I ask him to say the question properly.

He says: does it matter that it was hard?

I do not answer for a long time. Okonkwo tells me to take my time. Haller says that no answer is an acceptable answer.

I tell him it is not, and that I will try.

I say that I do not think it matters that it was hard. I want to be honest, because I would like to say that it does, and I have looked, and I cannot find it. Difficulty is not a virtue. My great-grandmother lost her hands and I am not going to tell them it made her wiser.

De Vries asks what my objection is, then. Because I clearly have one.

I tell him my objection is that he will get it in ninety minutes.

Okonkwo asks whether that is not the point.

And I say: the people I come from went there every afternoon for thirty years. That is about eleven thousand afternoons. Whatever it is that they had, it was not the ninety minutes. It was the eleven thousand.

De Vries says: so it is a dosage question.

I tell him maybe. I tell him I do not know. I say it twice.

And Haller, for the record, says that Ms Kamrani has expressed a reservation but has not identified a harm.

And I say: no. I haven't.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

There were five people in that room and I have never been so completely alone in my life.

The legal one, Haller, spoke four times and every time it was to convert something I had said into a shape that could go in a document. He was not being sly. That is his job and he is good at it and by the end of the session my six weeks of unease had been entered as *a reservation, no harm identified*, which is accurate, and which is the end of the matter.

De Vries is thirty-something and brilliant and has clearly been thinking about nothing else for a year. He was not hostile. He asked the best question anybody has asked me in five months — *does it matter that it was hard* — and I gave him a bad answer because I do not have a good one.

And Iris said almost nothing for two hours.

She sat at the end of the table and let her own people run it and she watched me the entire time, and twice she started to speak and did not.

Here is the thing I have not written down anywhere yet and I am going to write it now.

They are going to do it.

Not maybe. It is decided — it was decided before I got on the train this morning, probably weeks ago, and the second half of session five was not a consultation. It was the meeting where the last person with an objection is brought in and it is established, on the record, in a document, that she did not identify a harm.

I have been in the room for eleven weeks believing I was deciding something.

I was not deciding anything. I was being minuted.

And I sat in that chair with five clever decent people looking at me and I understood, at about the ninety-minute mark, that there is exactly one thing in that building that they cannot buy, cannot reproduce, and have not noticed.

Not the technique. I gave them that in session three and it was worth nothing to them.

Nobody in this company can pay attention.

They have four hundred thousand data points on attention. They have a research division. They have a product that sells it. And there is not one person on that floor who can hold a single thing for more than about nine seconds, including Iris, including De Vries, and I have watched all of them for five months without once being watched back.

I went to the hotel and I did not put the light on for a long time.

Then I got the notebook out and started a new page at the back, and ruled it into columns, the way my great-great-grandmother's teacher did in an exercise book in 1938, because I have read that account and I know exactly what it looks like.

I have not decided anything yet.

I want that written down and I want it dated. Tonight I have not decided anything. I have only ruled the columns.



INTERLUDE

The Marriage

*They married her to a man with land and name,
and she went quietly, and the season came*

*and went, and came, and she was kind to him,
and never once, in any year, or whim,
or fever, said the other name aloud.*

The poem does not follow her. The crowd went with the madman. She was left the house, the door, the hours, the ordinary spouse. Eleven hundred lines are his. Then hers: she waited, and was decent, and she died.

I want to stop here, because this is where I always stop.

Layli is married to a man called Ebn Salam. He is not cruel. He is not stupid. He loves her and she does not love him and she tells him so, and he accepts it and treats her well for years.

And she has an ordinary life. She keeps a house. She is good to people. She does not go into a desert and she does not become a legend and nobody writes eleven hundred lines about her.

Everybody remembers the madman.

Nobody has ever once asked whether she had the better life.

12 · Mira

My niece is nine.

I was there on a Sunday in the third week of the interviews, for a birthday, and there were fourteen children in that house and a paddling pool that had not been emptied since August.

And at about four o'clock I could not find her.

She was upstairs, on her bed, with the door shut and the noise of fourteen children coming up through the floor.

She was not on a device. There was no book. The room was tidy in the way a room is tidy when somebody has straightened it in order to be able to sit in it.

She was sitting cross-legged, facing the window, and her eyes were open, and she was not doing anything at all.

I stood in that doorway for — I do not know. A while. Long enough.

And then she came back, and she did it the way we all do it, which is that there is no coming back, she was simply looking at me and had been for a second or two.

She said: hi, auntie.

I said: what were you doing?

And Mira said: *nothing. I go to the garden.*

I did not say anything.

She said: *it's just a place. Everyone has one.*

I said: describe it.

And she frowned at me, because I had asked in a voice she had not heard from me before, and then she said, carefully:

It's dry. There's a wall all the way round. There's water down the middle in a stone bit. There's a tree at the end with red on it. I don't go down that end.

I said: where do you stand?

She said: *by the wall.*

I said: which side?

And she said: *left. I never go past the water.* And then, because she is nine and had run out of patience: *why?*

I said one more thing. I asked whether there was anybody else there.

And Mira said: *there's a man who stands behind me. He's always there. You're not supposed to turn round.*

She said it the way you would say there is a radiator under the window.

Then she went past me and down the stairs into fourteen children.

I want to set down clearly what is true here, because I have had four months to think about it and I have checked every part of it and it is worse than it looks.

Nobody taught her.

Kian cannot do it. Kian has never been able to do it and was never taught and cannot sit through the first stage. Her mother has never heard of any of this. I have never once discussed it with that child in her life. My father has never met her more than four times.

And she stands on the left, near the wall, and does not go past the water.

That is my great-great-grandmother's position. Sanam stood on the left. It is in the account. My father stood on the right and so do I.

I do not know what that means. I want to say that plainly rather than dress it up, because everybody who has come near this has dressed it up and the dressing is how it spreads.

There are three explanations and I have worked on all of them.

One: somebody told her and does not remember doing it. This is the likeliest and it is what any sensible person would conclude and I have not been able to find who.

Two: it is a shape a mind makes. A walled garden with water down the middle is the oldest picture of paradise in that language and there are pomegranates in half the poetry of that country and she has my brother's brain and my brother has my father's. That one is respectable. It does not account for the left-hand side.

Three: they were right.

I do not believe the third one. I have written that sentence four times now and gone back to it each time and I am leaving it in.

And here is the fourth thing, which is not an explanation, and which is what I actually think at two in the morning.

It does not matter which of the three is true.

Because whatever it is, it does not need a teacher, it does not need the disease, it does not need a village, and it does not need me. It got from a woman who died in 1968 to a nine-year-old in Capelle who has never been told any of it.

And a company in Utrecht with four hundred thousand data points and a research budget is about to spend three years learning to manufacture something that is already loose.

PART THREE — THE GROUND

13 • Session Six

Session six of six. Thirty-nine minutes.

She says: so this is the last one.

I tell her it says six on the folder.

It does, she says. And then she says she wants to ask me something and that it is not for the file, and that she can stop the recording.

I tell her not to stop it.

She lets that sit, and then she asks whether I would stay on.

I ask in what capacity.

Consultant. Two days a month, proper contract, proper money — she has had it costed, she says, she is not asking me for a favour. I would sit in on the design meetings. I would read what they write before it goes anywhere.

I ask why.

And she says: because you are the only person in the building who does not want us to do it.

I tell her that is not a reason to hire somebody.

She says it is the only reason to hire somebody. She has forty people who want this to work. Forty, including her. There is nobody in that room whose job it is to be unhappy about it, and the last time she raised a concern in a design meeting three people agreed with her warmly and then they moved to the next item and it went into the minutes as *discussed*.

I tell her she knows I would say yes.

She says she hoped.

And I tell her no — that she *knew*, before she asked, and that she has known for about three weeks.

She asks whether that is a problem.

I tell her it is not. I tell her it is the first thing she has done in six sessions that I would have done.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

She asked me and I said yes and I had decided in the second half of session five, in the hotel, with the light off, while I was ruling the columns.

I want to be exact about the order of things because the order is the only thing that will matter if anybody ever reads these pages.

I did not go there to do this. In February I got on a train because a company had found me and I was curious and, if I am honest, flattered.

In session five I understood that they were going to build it whatever I did. That is not a rationalisation and I have tested it four times since. Haller had the language ready. De Vries had a year of work behind him. The decision was made before I was in the room.

And then I understood the other thing, which is that there is not one person on that floor who can pay attention, and that I have been watched by nobody for five months.

So there were two facts and I put them next to each other, and by the time I got back to the hotel I had stopped being a woman who was consulted about a product.

I want to write down what I am actually doing, in plain words, once, so that I cannot later tell myself a nicer version.

I am going to say yes to everything.

I am going to be helpful. I am going to be so helpful that they cannot get rid of me. I am going to sit in their meetings for as long as they will have me and I am going to answer every question they ask, completely and honestly, and I am not going to lie about anything at all — not one word, not once, because a lie is a thing somebody can find and I do not intend to be findable.

Every true sentence, and no false ones, and in an order of my choosing.

That is my great-great-grandmother's teacher's method and I know it is because I have read the account. Ozra took eight true sentences out of eleven minutes of a woman objecting and left out

everything that held them together, and the result was a prayer, and there is not one false word in it.

I am doing the reverse. I am putting every sentence in and letting them decide which ones to keep.

And I am going to sit in a room with nine people, two days a month, for as long as it takes.

That is the whole of it and it is not complicated. I am not sabotaging anything. I am not stealing anything. I am not going to slow the product down by one day — I could not if I wanted to.

I am going to teach nine people to sit still, without ever once telling them that I am doing it, in a building where I have been hired to talk about sitting still.



INTERLUDE

What the Poems Did

*The verses went from market into house,
from house to road, from road to whichever mouth
would carry them, and mouths are cheap and quick.
He did not send them. That is the whole trick —
he only made them, and they had legs of their own,
and went, and did the thing, and he sat alone
and did not know for years what he had done.*

They still recite them. Ask them. Every one.

Nobody in this story sets out to do damage. That is the first thing to hold on to and it is the hardest.

Qays makes something because he cannot help making it. It is good, and because it is good it travels, and because it travels it makes her name a thing that is said in public by strangers — and a girl whose name is said in public by strangers cannot be married to the man who caused it.

He did not publish. There was no publishing. He made the thing and it got up and walked.

Eight hundred years later, the poems are taught in schools and she is a footnote in her own catastrophe, and everybody agrees the poems are beautiful, and they are.

14 • The Columns

I want to describe what I am keeping, exactly, because when this is found — and it will be found, everything is found eventually — I would rather it be read correctly than reconstructed by somebody clever.

At the back of this notebook there is a page ruled into five columns.

I ruled it in a hotel in Utrecht on the night of the second half of session five. I did it with a ruler I borrowed from reception and I did it badly and the lines are not straight.

The first column is a name. There are nine of them. Iris Vandermeer, Thomas de Vries, Adaeze Okonkwo, Martin Haller, and five others who came into the work later — two designers, a woman from communications, the man who runs the floor, and a junior researcher whose name I will not write here because she is twenty-four.

Nine people. Everybody who is in the room, two days a month, when I am in it.

The second column is a date. The first session at which that person was present. Iris is the first line because Iris is the first line.

The third column is also a date, and it is the one I have to explain.

It is the day I saw it take.

I have watched nine people, uninterrupted, for two days a month, for a long time now, and I know exactly what it looks like when somebody has started doing it privately and has not told anybody. It is not subtle if you can see. They stop reaching for the phone in the pause before a meeting starts. They begin arriving four or five minutes early and sitting. They stop finishing other people's sentences. There is a particular thing that happens to the face at rest.

De Vries took it in the fourth month and told nobody for eleven weeks and then mentioned it to Iris as though it were a productivity technique.

Haller — the lawyer, the last man on earth I would have picked — took it in the sixth month and has never mentioned it to anybody and does forty minutes every evening and I would put money on him being the best of the nine within five years.

Adaeze has not taken it and I do not think she will. She has tried it twice out of politeness and both times met the third thing at nine minutes and got up, and she is entirely happy, and there is nothing wrong with her.

The fourth column is a date in the future.

This is the one that will look worst and I am going to explain it plainly.

I have been doing this since March and there is a thing I can now estimate reasonably well, which is how long it takes a person who has started to get to the fourth thing on their own. Not the technique — the technique they have on day one, it is three sentences. The years.

For a person who begins in adulthood, with a working nervous system, doing it most days, it is between six and eleven years, and I have got fairly good at telling which end of that somebody is.

De Vries: 2029.

Haller: 2031.

Iris: 2034, and I think that is optimistic, and I will come back to why.

The fifth column is ruled and headed and empty.

The heading is one word and I wrote it in Persian because it is the only word of my great-grandmother's language that I use without thinking, and the word is *after*.

There is nothing in that column and there never will be, because it is not for me to fill in.

It is for their children.

That is what it was for in 1938 and it is what it is for now, and I have thought about crossing it out roughly once a week for a year and I have not done it.

* * *

Now I am going to write down the part I have been avoiding for six pages.

How.

Because it looks, written out like that, as though I am doing something to those nine people. Dosing them. Working on them.

I am not doing anything to them at all. I want that understood.

I sit in a room with them two days a month and I answer their questions accurately. That is the entire method. There is no manipulation in it and there is nothing anybody could point to.

Here is what actually happens.

They ask me a question about the practice — a real question, a good one, because they are clever and they are trying to build something. And I answer it properly, which takes time, because a proper answer to any question about this involves describing what it is like, and the only way to describe what it is like is in detail, and detail takes minutes.

And while I am describing it, in a quiet room, with the blinds half down, to people whose job that morning is to listen to me — they are sitting still.

Forty minutes. An hour. Two days a month.

That is all it is. Nobody has ever taught this any other way. Mehmān has been doing it for thirty-six years with a story about a madman in a desert, and my father did it with a sentence at bedtime, and Homa did it in 1943 by describing a garden to a girl who was frightened, and every single one of them would tell you the same thing:

you do not teach it. You put somebody in a room where nothing is happening and you keep them there long enough to notice.

The company is paying me to do that. They are paying me quite well. It is in the minutes.

15 · First Design Meeting

Programme design, meeting one. Two hours and ten minutes. This is twenty-two minutes in.

De Vries is saying that the working target is ninety minutes of attenuation with full return inside four hours, and that this is conservative.

I ask about the ninety.

He tells me to go on, and I ask why ninety.

Session length, he says. It is what people will book. An hour feels short for the price point and two hours is a problem for a working day.

So the number comes from the diary, I say.

He stops. Yes, he says. Is that wrong?

I tell him I do not know, that I am asking, and then I ask the question I came in with: does the state have a shape over time?

Okonkwo asks what I mean.

I mean: is twenty minutes a day for a year the same total as ninety minutes once a month for a year, or is it a different thing entirely? Because in my family it was every afternoon for thirty years, and nobody there would have understood the question.

We do not know, De Vries says.

No, I say. Nobody knows. And I am not saying it as a gotcha, because I do not know either.

Haller asks whether they can minute that they do not know. Iris says please.

Then I tell them the second thing.

In the practice, the difficulty is not a side effect. I am not saying it is virtuous. But when somebody sits through the third stage on day forty — the part where their own voice tells them it is pointless —

something happens that is not the quiet. They find out that the voice can be wrong about them.

Okonkwo asks whether I think that is load-bearing.

I tell her I think it might be the whole building and that I cannot prove it.

And De Vries says: but you cannot tell me it is a harm.

No. I cannot tell him it is a harm.

Noted as before, says Haller.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

Two hours and ten minutes.

Nine people in a room with the blinds half down and nothing on the table.

De Vries did not touch his phone once after the first forty minutes. I timed the gaps. In February he could not go four minutes.



INTERLUDE

The Woman on the Roof

There is a poem I keep beside the other one, and it is not eight hundred years old, it is sixty, and a woman wrote it in a city I have never lived in and it is about a girl standing on a roof.

The girl is waiting for someone. He is coming, she says. Someone who is like no one. He will come and the water will be clean and the bread will be fair and nobody's father will be beaten in the street. She has it all worked out. She knows what he will look like.

And the woman who wrote it will not tell you whether he comes.

That is the thing about that poem. Everybody wants it to be hopeful or despairing and it refuses both, and what it leaves you with is not a question about the saviour at all. It is a question about the roof.

What happens to a city that spends sixty years on a roof?

I did not put this together with Nizami for a long time. They are not the same story and they do not rhyme. But there is a girl on a roof

watching a road for a man who is like no one, and there is a man in a desert who has made a room out of watching, and neither of them is going to be interrupted, and I have been in a building for a year where four hundred people are waiting for somebody to come and give them back their attention.

He is coming. They have the roadmap. It is in the deck.

16 • Mehmān

I found him in 2015 and I have not written down how, and I am going to do it now because it is relevant and because I have never told anybody, including my father.

The archive in Tabriz has a box catalogued as *teaching materials, misc.* It has been there since 1974. My father photographed forty-one pages of it in 1996 through a researcher and never went himself.

I went. In 2011, when I was twenty-nine.

There are more than forty-one pages. There are two hundred and six, and most of them are a school register, and the rest is a woman's private arithmetic, and in among it there is a sheet of names and addresses in a different hand — a much later hand, ballpoint, 1970s — which is somebody's attempt, after the demolition, to keep track of where everybody went.

Eleven of the addresses were still good in 2015.

He is seventy-four. He lives outside Bremen in a ground-floor flat with a strip of garden and he has lived there since 1979. He was taken out of the House in 1949 as an infant and put in an institution and never adopted, and he has no name from before, and the name he uses is the one the House used for the thing that stands behind you in the garden, which he took for himself at some point in his forties as a joke that nobody has ever got.

He went numb in 1986. He was thirty-seven. He was treated and cured within the year and lost nothing except sensation in two fingers of his left hand.

And then he spent thirty-six years teaching this, quietly, for nothing, to about two hundred people.

I want to describe what it was like to sit opposite him, because it is the most frightened I have been in this entire business and there was nothing frightening in the room.

He made tea. We sat by the window. And after about four minutes he said, without any particular emphasis:

You can see, can you.

I said I did not know what he meant.

And Mehmān said: *You have not stopped looking at me since you came in and you have not blinked at the ordinary rate and you knew about the fingers before I put my hand on the table. Your father, or your mother?*

I said my father.

He said: *He looked at film?*

I said yes.

And he laughed and said: *Mine looked at nothing. I had to work it out on my own and it took me until I was fifty. You were given it. Do you know what you have?*

I said I thought it was just paying attention.

And he said: *It is. That is exactly what it is. Nobody else is doing it. You are the only person in most rooms who is actually in the room, and you have never once been in a room with somebody who could see you back, and you are sitting in one now, and I would like you to notice what that is like.*

I could not speak for a moment.

He said the rest of it over about four hours and I am going to set down the part that matters.

He does not think he is doing anything wrong. He has taught roughly two hundred people. He does not recruit and he does not have a group and there is no organisation and nobody pays anybody. He teaches with a story — Layli and Majnun, told in

pieces, over months, because it is a story every Iranian child half-knows and because nobody defends themselves against a story.

I sat in his front room in 2015 and did not realise for two hours that I was being taught.

He is not lonely. He has never married. He has no children. He does not miss either and he was very matter-of-fact about it in a way that I could not get underneath. He gets up at five. He goes to the garden twice a day, morning and evening, and has done for thirty-six years, and he described it to me in exactly the words my father uses and my niece uses and I use, including the pomegranate and the water and the fact that you cannot smell anything, which he thinks is funny.

He stands at the shaded end. There is no shade. He knows there is no shade.

And he is content. That is the whole of it and it is why I drove back to the hotel and sat in the car park for forty minutes.

He is the most contented human being I have ever been near. He is seventy-four, he has almost nothing, and there is no ache in him anywhere. I looked. That is what I do and I am good at it and I looked for four hours and there is nothing there.

And I could not work out, and cannot work out now, seven years later, whether I was sitting opposite a man who has arrived somewhere —

or a man in a desert who was offered a way out at some point in his forties and did not take it, because by then the woman would have been an interruption.

17 · Design Meeting, Fourth Month

Programme design, meeting seven. This is about fifty minutes in.

Iris says I have been quiet.

I tell her I have been listening.

You have been listening for about fifty minutes, she says.

I ask whether she wants me to say something.

And she says she wants to know what I am doing when I do that. Genuinely. Half the table has started copying me, she says, and she does not think they know they are doing it.

I tell her I am not doing anything.

De Vries says that is not true and that I know it is not true.

So I tell them. I am listening to what people say, and I am not doing anything else while they say it.

Okonkwo asks whether that is it.

That is it.

She says: Bahar, come on.

And I ask her how many times in the last hour she looked at her screen.

She does not know.

Nine, I tell her.

She does not say anything.

I tell her I am not scoring her. Thomas was six. Martin was two and both of those were the same email. Iris was eleven and she is the one running the meeting. It is not a criticism and there is nothing wrong with any of them. It is what a body does.

I am not doing anything you cannot do, I say. I am just not doing anything *else*.

And Iris says: can we come back to the consent flow.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

That was a mistake and I have been turning it over for a week.

I told them the numbers. I have never done that in eleven months and I did it because Adaeze pushed and because I was tired and because there is a small vain thing in me that wanted, for four seconds, to be seen.

Iris moved the meeting on inside twenty seconds. She did it smoothly.

And then she looked at me for the rest of the session.

Not suspiciously. She has no reason to be suspicious of anything — I have not lied to her, I have not withheld one fact, and every word I have said in that building is in a transcript. There is nothing to find.

But she looked at me, and she did not look at anything else, and she did it for the last forty minutes of a two-hour meeting.

She is getting better. She is the slowest of the nine and I have written 2034 beside her name and I think that is optimistic — but she has done twenty minutes a day since the seventh of June, without missing a day, without telling me, and she has stopped touching her phone in the last five minutes before a meeting starts.

I taught her that. She thinks it is discipline.

And she is the one person in that building who might, eventually, look at me the way I look at everybody, and if she gets there she will see the whole of it in about ten seconds, and I have written the date 2034 beside her name in a notebook in a hotel drawer.

Which is either an estimate or a countdown, and I have not decided which, and I have started to notice that I do not want to.



INTERLUDE

The Two Fathers

Her father would not give her. His would not release him.

*Two men who loved two children, and between them
the whole of it. Neither wished harm.*

*Both had a house to keep and a good name,
and each of them, in his own kitchen, in the dark,
would have told you plainly that he had no choice.*

They buried both children within the year. The houses stood. The names came through. The land passed on, as it was meant to, to a son, and nobody was punished, and no one in either family was ever cruel, and everything that happened, happened well.

If you take one thing from this poem, take that.

There is no villain in it. Every single person acts within their rights, for reasons that would stand up in any room, out of love or duty or ordinary self-protection.

And two children die in a desert and a house, and the poem is eight hundred years old and the arrangement it describes is still running, everywhere, today, in every institution you have ever worked for.

Nobody does anything wrong. The thing happens anyway.

18 · The Weighbridge

I went to the ground in October, in the fourth month, because Iris asked me to and the company paid for it.

That is the part I want on the record before anything else. I did not go on a pilgrimage. Lucent flew me to Tabriz and put me in a hotel and expensed the car, because De Vries wanted photographs of the site for a deck, and I said I would go, and they were grateful.

It is eleven kilometres past where the good road stops, and the road stops in exactly the place my great-great-grandmother described in an account written in 1962 that I have read perhaps forty times.

There is a state agricultural depot on it now.

A concrete apron, a weighbridge, four grain silos and a chain-link fence with a gate that stands open. Two men work there. One of them let me walk around and did not ask why and did not seem to find it strange, and I think people do come — not many, once every few years — and he has decided not to be interested.

There is nothing there.

I want to be accurate about that, because I have read a great deal of writing about places like this and it is always full of atmosphere, and there was none.

The bowl of ground is there. You can see it is a bowl. The rise is there, where the boys stood in 1938 and threw a stone at a child who could not feel it land.

The poplars are gone. There is no wall, no brick, no line in the earth, no foundation, nothing under the concrete that I could see

and nothing at the edges. They cleared it properly. Whoever did that job did it well.

I stood on the weighbridge for about ten minutes because it seemed to be roughly where the yard was, and I could not make anything happen, and I did not particularly want to.

Two hundred people sat down in pairs on that ground every evening at sundown for thirty-six years and went over each other's feet with their eyes four inches away, because their bodies had stopped telling them anything and somebody else's eyes were the only warning system left.

They rounded every corner in the place by hand with a rasp so that nobody would open a hip on a doorframe and not know.

A man walked five weeks on a nail and made a joke about it that his great-great-granddaughter's father told her in a kitchen in Dordrecht.

There is a weighbridge on it.

I took eleven photographs for the deck and three of them were used and one of them is on a slide that has now been shown to investors twice.

I did not cry and I am not going to pretend I did. What I felt, standing there, was something much less respectable and I am going to write it down.

I felt relieved.

Because there is nothing there, and nothing to protect, and no site and no ruin and no grave with a name on it, and therefore nothing that anybody can take away from me.

The only place any of it still exists is in about forty people who do not know each other, and a girl of nine in Capelle, and a notebook in a hotel drawer in Utrecht with five columns ruled in it.

And on the flight back I understood the thing I had been circling since March, and it is this.

They are not going to build a village. They cannot. My father was right in his kitchen and he said it in nine words at the door with my coat on.

They are going to build ninety minutes, and sell it, and it will work.

And the House had a wedding.

PART FOUR — THE GARDEN

19 • Design Meeting, Seventh Month

Programme design, meeting fourteen. Two hours and forty minutes.

This is an hour and twelve minutes in.

De Vries says they have had the first proper phenomenology back from the pilot cohort. Twelve people, six sessions each. He wants to read some of it out and then ask me something.

Eleven of the twelve, he says, describe an enclosed space. Nine describe a wall. Seven mention water. Four use the word garden without being prompted.

Nobody says anything for about eleven seconds.

I ask him to read me the four.

He reads them. *A courtyard, quite dry, nothing planted. It was walled all the way round and I couldn't find the way in or out, which didn't bother me. There's a channel or a gutter down the middle with water in it, I didn't cross it, no reason. A garden. Not a nice one. Very bare.*

Nobody says anything for about nineteen seconds.

Iris says my name.

And I ask whether any of them mentioned a tree.

Two, he says.

At the far end.

He checks. Yes.

Did they get to it?

No. And then he finds the line and reads it. *It stayed the same distance, which I remember thinking was odd and then not thinking was odd.*

Twenty-six seconds.

Okonkwo asks whether I am all right.

And I ask whether there was anybody behind them.

De Vries takes a very long time and then says: six of the twelve.

I ask whether any of them turned round.

No.

Did anyone ask them to?

He says yes — they asked all of them to, in the third session, it is in the protocol — and that none of them did it.

I ask whether they said why.

And he says that they could not. That that is the finding. That is the thing he wanted to ask me about. Eleven of twelve, and every single one of them, asked why they did not turn round, gave a different answer, and none of the answers were reasons.

One of them said it would be rude.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

Twelve people.

Twelve people who have never met each other, never met me, never heard of a village outside Tabriz, and who lay in a room in a converted mill outside Utrecht with a device attenuating their peripheral signal for ninety minutes each.

Eleven of them found the garden.

They found *my* garden. The dry ground and the wall with no gate and the water down the middle and the tree at the end that stays the same distance. Six of them were stood behind by something and not one of them turned round and not one of them can say why.

There is no house here. There is no lineage. There is no disease, no village, no teaching, no story about a madman in a desert, nobody sitting on the end of anybody's bed in 1988.

There is a machine in a room in Utrecht and it took ninety minutes.

I have been sitting on this hotel bed for four hours and I am going to write down the three things and then I am going to try to sleep.

One. Every explanation I have ever had for what the garden is has just collapsed.

It is not inherited, because these people are not descended from anybody. It is not taught, because nobody taught them. It is not a story that spreads, because they never heard the story. It is not something Homa built in 1943 and handed to a dying girl, because these twelve had no contact with any part of that.

Two. Which leaves the explanation I have written down four times in this notebook and gone back to each time and refused.

It is a shape a mind makes when nothing is coming in. Any mind. Given the same conditions, at the same depth, human beings go to the same place — a walled enclosure, dry, with water down the middle and something living at the far end that you cannot reach, and something behind you that you do not turn round on.

It is not a place. It is what we are, underneath, when the noise stops. Every one of us, the same, and we have never known because none of us has ever been quiet enough for long enough to find out.

My great-great-grandmother did not discover a country. She got to the bottom of a person, in a bad winter, and so has everybody since, and so did twelve strangers in a mill in a business park.

Three, and this is the one I cannot put down.

If that is true, then the House was not special.

Two hundred people lost their hands and their eyes and their feet, and lived behind a wall for thirty-six years, and refused a cure in 1947 and stayed ill for another generation — to protect something that was never theirs and was never rare and is available to anybody in a chair with ninety minutes and four hundred euro.

They gave everything for it.

And a company in a business park has just done it on a Tuesday, twelve times, before lunch.



INTERLUDE

What He Ate

They brought him bread. He did not always take it.

They brought him water and he did not drink.

*The animals came near and did not fear him,
which the poets liked, and made a great deal of,
and it is the only part they got quite wrong:
they thought it holy. It was only this —
he had stopped moving suddenly. That is all.
Nothing that lives is frightened of a stone.*

There is a version of this story where the desert makes him holy, and that version is very popular, and I have never believed a line of it.

He did not become a saint out there. He became *still*, which is a different thing, and stillness looks like holiness from a distance and from close up looks like a man who has stopped eating properly.

The gazelles come near him because he does not startle. That is the whole miracle. He no longer moves the way a person moves — no jerk, no flinch, no sudden reach — and so the animals treat him as landscape.

Ask yourself what happened to a man to make an animal read him as landscape.

20 · What Iris Did

She came to the hotel.

That has not happened in eleven months and it is not in any transcript, and I am going to set it down as accurately as I can because I think it is the most important hour of this entire business and there is no record of it anywhere but here.

She knocked at about nine in the evening. She had a coat on and she had not eaten and she said, before I had got the door properly open:

Eleven of twelve.

I said I know.

She said: *can I come in.*

We sat in a hotel room with the overhead light off because I had not turned it on in four hours and neither of us mentioned that.

And Iris Vandermeer, who is thirty-four and sincere and who I have been quietly teaching to sit still since March, said the following, and I am putting it down in full.

I need to say something and I need you not to be clever at me while I say it, because you are always slightly cleverer than me in these rooms and I have decided to stop minding but not tonight.

I said all right.

She said: My brother is called Joost. He is twenty-six. He cannot finish anything. Not books — anything. A conversation, a job, a course, a girlfriend. He is not stupid and he is not unwell in any way a doctor has been able to name and he has been to two clinics and both of them said essentially that he is a young man in the twenty-first century.

He was fine until he was about fourteen.

And I have watched, for twelve years, something come apart in a person I love, and everybody's answer is that he should try harder, and I have never once believed it was his fault, and I took this job in 2020 because I thought — I actually thought this — I thought if I could find out what the thing is that got taken away from him, I could get it back.

And today twelve people lay in a room in our building and eleven of them went somewhere.

And I have been in this business for four years and I have never once seen a result like that, and I should be — Bahar, I should be running down a corridor.

I said: and you are not.

And she said: *No. I came here.*

I asked her why.

And she said: Because you went white when Thomas read the four quotes out, and you sat in that meeting for another eighty minutes and answered every question anybody asked you and were completely helpful, and I have spent eleven months watching you do that and tonight is the first time I have understood that being helpful is what you do when you have decided something.

So I am asking you directly, in a room with no camera in it, and I am asking as the only person here who has ever asked you anything twice.

What is it that you are not saying?

* * *

I want to record that I had a clear opportunity here and I took a different one.

I could have told her. I want that written down. There was an hour available in a hotel room with the light off, with a decent frightened woman who has a brother she cannot save, and I could have said all of it — the columns, the nine names, the dates, what I have been doing in her building for eleven months and why, every word of it, and I think she would have listened to the end.

I did not.

I said: I think you should let Joost sit in a room with nothing in it for twenty minutes a day and I think he will fail, and I think he will fail for about a year, and I think you should not tell him what he is failing at.

She said: that isn't an answer.

I said: no.

And she sat in that chair for a long time. About four minutes, I think, though I did not count, and neither did she, and that is the point.

Then she said: You do that too. The thing where you don't fill a silence. Thomas has started doing it. Martin does it now and Martin used to talk over everybody in the building.

I said nothing.

And Iris said: *I've started doing it.*

And then, after a while: *Did you do that to us?*

And I said — and this is the only sentence in eleven months that I have to think hard about, because it is true and it is the most dishonest thing I have ever said —

I said: I have never said anything to any of you that wasn't true.

She looked at me for a while.

Then she said good night and went, and in the doorway she said something I have been carrying since.

She said: You know what the worst part of my job is? Everybody who works for me is trying to give people back the thing that we take away all day. And not one of us has ever said that out loud in a meeting.

21 · Bremen

I went to Mehmān in the ninth month because I had nobody else.

I want to say at the start of this that I went to be talked out of it and that I knew, on the train, that he was not going to do that.

He made tea. We sat by the window. His hands are worse than they were in 2015 and he is seventy-four and he moves like a much younger man because he does not startle.

I told him everything.

The columns. The nine names. The dates. Eleven of twelve in a mill outside Utrecht. All of it, in order, for about ninety minutes, and he did not interrupt once and did not make a single noise of encouragement, which nobody does, which is the most restful thing in the world.

At the end he said: *good*.

I said: that is not the response I came for.

And he said: *You came for the other one and I do not have it.*

Then he said the thing that I have been turning over for three months and that I still cannot get around.

He said: You are worried that the House was not special. That the garden is in everybody and the village threw away its hands for nothing.

I said yes.

And Mehmān said: *Bahar jan. Of course it is in everybody. What did you think it was?*

I said I had thought it was ours.

He laughed — properly, with his head back, which I have seen him do twice.

He said: *It is a room in a house that everybody lives in and almost nobody goes into. That is all it has ever been. The people in that village did not own it. They were only the ones who could not avoid it, because their bodies had stopped shouting and there was nowhere else to be in the afternoon.*

He said: *You have been thinking of it as a treasure and worrying that it is being stolen. It is not a treasure. It is a room. Nobody can steal a room.*

I said: then why does it matter what the company does?

And this is the answer, and it is why I got on a train, and it is the only sentence anybody has given me in a year that I have not been able to take apart.

He said: *Because they are not selling the room. They are selling ninety minutes in it, once a month, at a price, with a person outside the door holding a clock. And a room you visit is not the same as a room you live in, and the difference is not the room. The difference is you.*

I asked him what he meant.

And he said: *I have been going twice a day for thirty-six years. I am not a better man for it. I want to be extremely clear with you about that because you have been treating me as evidence and I am not evidence of anything.*

What I am is somebody for whom the outside has become thin. Food is thin. People are thin. I do not miss my wife because I never had one and I do not miss children because I never had any, and I have told you before that there is no ache in me, and you looked for four hours in 2015 and did not find one, and you were right, there is none.

And you have never once asked yourself whether that is a good report.

I could not say anything.

He said: You want to know what the village had that the machine cannot give. It is not the garden. They all had the garden and it was free.

They had a wedding, and a school, and a woman who could smell her own arm burning, and a man who walked five weeks on a nail and was funny about it, and two hundred people who went over each other's feet every evening because nobody else was going to.

They had each other in the afternoons and the garden in the evenings and the two things held each other up.

I have the garden. I have had it twice a day for thirty-six years and I am seventy-four and I live alone and there is nobody in this flat.

Ask your father what he thinks I am.

* * *

I asked him one more thing at the door and I did not plan it.

I asked whether he had ever turned round.

And Mehmān said: Once. In 1994. I had been going eight years and I was arrogant and I thought I had earned something.

I said: what happened?

And he said: Nothing. There was nobody there. There is never anybody there, Bahar, there is a fault in a nerve and a mind that cannot tolerate a signal without a source, and I have known that since I was fifty and it has changed nothing whatsoever.

I said: then why does nobody turn round?

And he said: Because we are not children. We know exactly what is behind us and we would rather be visited.



INTERLUDE
The Letters

*She wrote to him. Nobody records what in.
The poem has eleven hundred lines of his
and gives her four, and in those four she says
the ordinary thing that no one ever says
in poems, which is: come back, or do not come,
but tell me which, because I have a life
and it is going on, and I am in it,
and there is a man asleep beside me now.*

He answered her in verses. They were good. He sent no message.
He sent literature. She read them, and was praised for having
caused them, and put them in a box, and shut the box.

This is the exchange the poem is least interested in and it is the one
I would put on the first page.

She asks him a practical question. She wants to know what is
happening, because something is happening to her, in a house, with
a husband in it, in a real year.

And he sends her the best poem anybody has written that century.

He is not being cruel and he is not being cowardly. He has simply,
by then, lost the ability to answer a question. Everything that comes
into him goes to the same place and comes out transfigured, and a
woman in a house wanted a plain answer and got art instead.

They still recite it. She got the box.

22 • What I Am Doing to Nine People

I have to write this chapter and I have been avoiding it for five
weeks.

Iris asked me in a hotel room with the light off whether I did it to
them, and I said the sentence I said, and it was true, and I have not
slept well since.

So. Plainly. What I am doing, with nothing left out.

I am not drugging anybody. There is nothing in this that anybody
could take to a lawyer. I have not touched a person, deceived a
person, or asked a person to do anything.

I have never lied. Eleven months, six intake sessions, fourteen design meetings, four hundred-odd hours of recorded conversation, and there is not one false statement anywhere in it. I have checked. Haller's team has the transcripts and if they went through every word they would find nothing, because there is nothing.

Everything I have done is this: I answer questions accurately, at length, in quiet rooms, and while I am doing it the people in those rooms are sitting still.

That is it. That is the entire mechanism and I want it written in short words so that nobody can make it sound clever.

You cannot teach this. Nobody has ever taught it. What you can do is put a person somewhere with nothing happening and keep them there, over and over, until one day they notice the second thing arriving and recognise it, and once you have recognised the second thing you are already doing it and nobody has told you anything.

Homa did it in 1943 by describing a garden to a frightened girl.

My father did it by sitting on the end of a bed.

Mehmān does it with a story about a madman that takes him about eight months to tell.

I am doing it in a conference room in a business park and being paid four hundred euro a day.

* * *

Now the part I have not written down.

Why nine.

Because that is who is in the room, and I did not choose them, and that is true and it is not the answer.

Here is the answer.

Because I have read my great-great-grandmother's account, and my father's, and I know what the House did and I know precisely what it cost. Two hundred people stayed ill for a generation. A boy was put in a room with four adults and passed between them for

four years by people who loved him. A woman on a kitchen roof watched a car take her son away and did not come down until noon.

They did all of that to reach one household. One. That was the largest thing they could imagine reaching, from a bowl of ground eleven kilometres past the end of a road, and they gave everything they had to reach it and they very nearly failed.

I have a corporation.

I have nine people who are paid to sit in a room with me, a research division, a distribution network, a communications department and an investor deck. I did not build any of it and I could not have built it and it was here when I arrived.

And there is nobody in it who can see me.

So the honest answer to *why nine* is: because nine was available.

I have not decided anything beyond nine. I want that on the page and dated, the way I wanted the last one dated. There is nothing in the fifth column and there is no plan beyond the room I am in.

But I know what I am and I have known since the second half of session five, and I am not going to write the word down because writing it down would be a small dishonest way of being absolved of it.

I will write this instead.

My great-grandmother's people did what they did because they thought they had something and the world was about to take it. They were wrong about having it — Mehmān is right, everybody has it, it is a room in a house everybody lives in.

But they were not wrong about the second part.

23 · Design Meeting, Eleventh Month

Programme design, meeting twenty-two. This is near the end.

Van Loon is saying they are looking at a soft launch in three cities in the third quarter, invitation only, and that Comms have a name.

Adeyemi says: we are calling it The Room.

Nobody says anything for about nine seconds.

I ask who chose it.

It came out of the workshop, she says. There were about forty on the list. That one kept coming back.

I ask whether I was in the workshop.

No, she says. It was a Comms thing. You weren't needed.

I ask whether anybody said the word to me first.

She does not think so. And then she asks whether it is wrong.

I tell her no. I tell her it is very good.

Iris says my name.

And I say it again: it is good, it is the right name, I would have chosen it.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

Forty names on a whiteboard in a workshop I was not in, and the one that kept coming back was the word Mehmān used to me in a flat in Bremen in the ninth month, and the word my father has never used and the word that is not in any account I have ever read.

There is no mystery in it. It is an obvious word. It is the obvious word.

That is what has kept me awake.

It is the obvious word, and eleven of twelve people found the same garden, and a nine-year-old in Capelle stands where a woman who died in 1968 stood, and a marketing department in a business park arrived at Mehmān's sentence by a different road inside a year.

Everybody keeps arriving at the same place.

Nobody is being told anything. There is no transmission and no lineage and no secret and there never was. It is simply where you end up, and the House thought it had a country and it had a room, and the room has a name and everybody who gets there gives it more or less the same one.

I have spent a year defending a thing from people who were always going to find it, because it was never hidden, because it is under everybody's floor.

And I have nine names in a notebook.



INTERLUDE

The Death of Layli

She died first. Nobody remembers that.

Ask anybody how the story ends and they will tell you about the madman at the grave.

She died in a house, of an ordinary thing, in a year the poem does not make much of. Her husband had died before her and she had mourned him properly, because she was a decent woman and it was owed, and then she was free — genuinely, entirely free, for the first time in her adult life.

And she was free for some months, and she did not send for him, and he did not come.

Both of them had the door open. Neither went through it.

The poem gives her four lines of dying and eleven hundred to the man who came to the grave afterwards and lay on it and would not get up.

I have read this poem for thirty years and I have never once been able to decide whether he loved her more than anybody has ever loved anybody, or whether he had, by the end, no idea who she was.

24 • My Father, Second Visit

I drove to Dordrecht in the eleventh month and this time I asked him.

He made tea. We sat. And I said: are you all right? Have you ever been? And was it a present or a delivery?

Three questions in a row, in his kitchen, at forty years old, and my hands were not steady.

My father looked at me for a while.

Then he said: *Which one do you want first?*

I said the last one.

And he said: *A delivery. Obviously a delivery. I have known that since 1996 and you have known it since you were about twenty-nine and you have been driving here for nine years hoping I would say something that made it a present.*

I said: then why did you give it to me?

And he said the thing.

He said: *Because it is the best thing I have and I love you.*

Bahar jan, listen. Both are true. It was put in me before I could speak, by people with a purpose, and I have spent my life obeying an instruction I cannot get underneath. And it is also the best thing I have and I gave it to my daughter on the end of her bed because I wanted her to have the best thing I had.

There is no version where I worked out which one it was and then acted. Nobody has ever had that available. You do the thing and you find out afterwards what it was, and mostly you are wrong about that too.

I said: Kian says something like that.

And Dariush Kamrani, who was called something else for the first five years of his life and cannot remember it, said: *Kian is the cleverest of the three of us and he has never once noticed.*

Then I asked whether he was all right.

And he said — and this took him some time —

I am seventy in four years. I have restored film for forty-three years and I am good at it and there are eleven pictures in this country that exist because I did not give up on them. I have two children. My daughter drives here and asks me questions with an angle on them and my son drives here and asks me nothing and both of them come.

I go to the garden most days.

And I have never in my life been able to stay in a room with anybody for very long, and your mother told me that on the day she

left and she was right, and I have been alone in this flat for eleven years and I am not unhappy, and I do not know whether that is a good report.

That is the second time somebody has used that phrase to me in three months and neither of them knew the other had said it.

Then I asked the last one. Or the first one. I asked whether he thought I should stop.

And my father, who has spent nine years answering me with weather, said:

I think you should ask your brother.

PART FIVE — THE PROTOCOL

25 • Capelle

I asked my brother on a Thursday in November because Thursday is five-a-side and I knew he would be in a good mood and would give me an hour before he had to go.

We sat in the kitchen. Two of the children were somewhere and Mira was at the table doing something to a shoe with a marker pen.

I told him.

Not all of it. Not the columns. But more than I have told anybody except Mehmān — the company, the machine, the twelve people, the garden, and the fact that our father did not give us the same thing and that one of us got something and the other did not.

Kian listened for about twenty minutes. He got up twice, once for the kettle and once because a child shouted, and both times he came back and picked up exactly where he had been, which I have never in my life been able to do and which I have spent thirty years assuming was a deficiency in him.

At the end he said: *So they've built a machine that puts you in the shed.*

I said: the what?

And he said: *The shed. That's what Dad calls it.*

I put my cup down.

He said: *When I was about eight I asked him why he sat in the chair like that and he said — hang on — he said, "I go and sit in the shed for a bit." And I said what shed, and he said the shed at the bottom of the garden, and I said we haven't got a garden, and he said no. And that was it. That was the whole conversation and I've never thought about it since.*

Bahar. What's the matter?

I could not answer him for a moment.

Nine years. Nine years of driving to Dordrecht and asking that man questions with an angle on them, and he told my brother, once, when Kian was eight, in eleven words, and Kian filed it under things Dad says and got on with his life.

Then I asked Kian the thing I had come to ask.

I said: should I stop?

And my brother said: *Stop what?*

I said: helping them.

And he said: *Are you helping them?*

And I did not answer, and he looked at me for a moment — my brother, who cannot finish a book, who has never sat still for two minutes, who has been quietly pitied by me since I was fifteen — and he said:

Okay. None of my business. But can I say the thing I actually think and then you can ignore it?

I said yes.

He said: *You've all got it the wrong way round. You and Dad and this bloke in Bremen. You think the quiet is the thing and the rest of it is the interruption.*

It's the other way round.

The rest of it IS it. That's the whole thing. Mira, the boiler, the lads on Thursday, Anouk being furious with me about the bins. That's not stuff getting in the way of my life, that's my life, and I don't have to go anywhere to get to it.

And you three have all worked out how to leave the room, and you're all very good at it, and none of you can be in the room.

That's not a superpower, Bahar. That's the thing that's wrong with you.

Sorry. You asked.

Then Mira held up the shoe and he said it was beautiful and it was not, and he went to five-a-side.



INTERLUDE

What They Did With Him

*They came out from the town to look at him
and stood about a hundred paces off,*

and one man said: he is a saint. And one said: he is finished. And a third one said nothing at all, and went back down the road, and told his wife about it over food.

And in the town they made a thing of him. They spoke his name to strangers with a kind of pride, the way you speak about a storm that took your neighbour's roof and left your own.

Nobody fetched him. That would have been rude, and difficult, and no one's job, and he was better where he was: a thing to point at, out beyond the last house, where the road stops.

Here is what a town does with a man like that.

It does not help him and it does not stop him. It makes him a landmark. It becomes proud of him. It tells visitors.

And it goes on living exactly as it lived before, because a saint out beyond the last house is not an argument about how anybody should live. He is a curiosity, and a curiosity is the safest thing a challenge can be turned into.

26 • The Protocol

Programme design, meeting twenty-six. Three hours and five minutes.

This is eight minutes in.

De Vries says this is the protocol as it will go to the regulator. He would like to read it and then take objections, and he would like mine on the record whatever they are.

Ninety minutes of attenuation. Full return within four hours, verified. Supervised throughout, on site, one attendant per two participants. Contraindications screened at intake — no history of psychosis, dissociative disorder or seizure. No participant under twenty-five.

Maximum one session per calendar month. That is a hard cap and it is in the licence, not the guidance.

Six sessions, then a mandatory ninety-day gap and a reassessment.

Four hundred and twenty euro a session.

Haller adds that the consent flow is three stages with seventy-two hours of cooling-off between the second and the third.

Then De Vries says my name.

I tell him I do not have an objection.

Iris says: say it anyway.

I tell her I do not have one, and that this is not a tactic. I have read it four times. It is a good protocol and it is more careful than it needs to be, and Martin has done things in the consent flow that I would not have thought of.

Okonkwo says: but.

One a month, I say.

That is the cap, says De Vries. That is us being conservative.

I know, I tell him. I am not saying it is too many. It is twelve a year.

Yes.

My father has done it every day since he was five. That is about twenty-two thousand.

And you think there is a threshold, he says.

I tell him I do not know. Nobody knows. I have said it in every meeting since March and it is still true and they should minute it again.

Haller minutes it.

Then I say the other half, because I have been the person in the room who is unhappy for a year and it has made me sound like I am against this and I am no longer sure that I am.

Iris tells me to go on.

Twelve a year, I say, for four hundred and twenty euro, in a supervised room, for a person who has never in their life had twenty consecutive minutes with nothing in it — that is twelve more than they have ever had. And I have spent a year in this building implying that is worth nothing because it is not twenty-two

thousand, and I think that is a rich thing to say from where I am standing.

De Vries asks whether he can ask me something not for the minutes. Haller says he would rather it was in the minutes. De Vries says fine, minute it, and then asks:

Would you let your niece do it? At twenty-five?

I take a long time.

No.

Why not?

Because she does not need it, I say. She is nine and she found it on her own in a bedroom in Capelle with the door shut and nobody has ever told her anything.

Fourteen seconds of nothing.

And then Okonkwo says: Bahar, I'm sorry — what?

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

I said it out loud in a room with fourteen people in it and a recording running.

I have gone over it about two hundred times since and I cannot make it come out as an accident, and I cannot make it come out as a plan either, and I think the truth is worse than both: I said it because Thomas asked me a good question at the end of a long meeting and I have not lied to any of these people in a year and I did not have a true answer available that would not include her.

They have a nine-year-old now.

Not her name. I did not say her name and Iris shut the discussion down inside forty seconds, which she did for me and which I am not sure was for me.

But there is a line in the minutes of Meeting 26 that says a child of nine, no exposure, no instruction, found the state independently, and there are fourteen people in that programme and every one of them heard it, and De Vries has been awake ever since — I can see

it, he has that particular colour — because if it can happen in a bedroom in Capelle with nobody teaching anybody then the entire protocol is answering a question that may not be the right question.

And I did that.

Eleven months of never lying, which I have been quietly proud of, which I have written down in these pages as though it were a discipline —

and it turns out that a person who never lies will, at the end of a long meeting, hand over a child.

27 · What Iris Found

She came to me before the next meeting and she did it properly, in a room she had booked, with the door shut and nothing recording, and she put a folder on the table and did not open it.

She said: *I need to tell you what I've done and you're going to be angry and I'd rather you were angry with the accurate version.*

I said all right.

She said: *After the last meeting I pulled the transcripts. All of them. Every session, every design meeting, four hundred and eleven hours. I had them indexed.*

I said: you've had them indexed all along.

She said: *For content. I had them indexed for you.*

And then she opened the folder.

I want to describe what was in it because it is the closest anybody has come and because it will matter later.

It was a chart. Twenty-two rows. Every meeting I had attended, in order, and against each one: my speaking time, the number of questions I had asked, the average length of the silences after I answered something, and the number of times any other person in the room had interrupted me.

The last column was the one.

Meeting 1: nine interruptions. Meeting 22: none.

She said: *In February people talked over you constantly. Thomas talked over you four times in the first hour. By August nobody in that room has interrupted you in eleven meetings.*

And the silences after you answer something have gone from about two seconds to about nineteen.

And meetings that you're in now run an average of fifty minutes longer than meetings you're not in, and nobody complains, and I checked the feedback and people say they're the good ones.

I said: what do you think that is?

And Iris said: *I think you're the calmest person any of us has ever met and it's contagious and I don't think you're doing it on purpose.*

And then last night at about two in the morning I thought: what if she is.

And I sat with that for a bit and I couldn't make it into anything. There's no crime in it. You've never lied. You've answered every question. Legal has been over every word you've said and there is nothing there — Bahar, I've had a lawyer read four hundred hours of you and the report is two lines long and the second line is "no concerns".

So I don't have an accusation. I have a chart.

I looked at the chart for a while.

Then I said: what do you want me to say about it?

And she said the thing that I have not been able to put down since.

She said: *I want you to tell me it's good. That's all. I have watched my team get better at their jobs and calmer and kinder and I have watched Martin Haller become a person I would have a drink with, and it has all happened in the eleven months you have been in that room, and every single bit of it is an improvement, and I cannot shake the feeling that something has been done to us.*

And I don't even mind. That's the mad part. I'd sign the consent form.

I just want to know whether I'd have been asked.

* * *

I did not answer her.

I sat in that room and looked at a chart with my whole year on it in four columns, made by a woman who had done the arithmetic honestly and had come to the right conclusion and had no way to prove it and did not want to.

And what I felt was not fear.

I have been trying for a fortnight to find the word for what I felt and the nearest I can get is *recognition*, and that is not a good sign.

Because there was a woman in 1962 who sat in a bowl of ground for twelve days and made a film she believed was hers, and a teacher stood behind her camera and translated everything for her and gave her eight true sentences out of eleven minutes.

And that filmmaker was clever, and decent, and she never found out.

Iris has done in eleven months what nobody in that entire account managed in twenty-four years.

She has not got it. She has got the shape of it, and the shape has no crime in it, and she has come and put it on a table in front of me and asked me to tell her it is all right.

And the reason I could not answer is not that I was caught.

It is that I have spent a year telling myself I am doing this to a corporation, and a corporation cannot be wronged, and a corporation is not a person.

She is a person. She was in the room the whole time. And I put her on the first line.



INTERLUDE

The Grave

*He came to it at last, and lay along it,
and put his face against the ground, and stayed.*

*They tried to lift him twice and gave it up,
and after a while they let him be, and prayed,
and went home, and he was there in the morning,
and in the evening, and the next day, and the next.*

He had, by then, no need of her at all. He had a place to put his face against and nothing in the world to interrupt him, and he had wanted that since he was a boy, and here at the end of everything it came: a stone, a name on it, and no one calling.

They say he died of love. He may have done. He also died of having got his wish.

This is the end of the story and everybody knows it and almost nobody reads it properly.

He gets what he has been asking for since the schoolroom. Not her — he could have had her twice and did not go. What he gets is a place with nothing in it, and her name written on a stone, and no possibility of anybody arriving.

He gets the object without the person and the attention without the interruption, and he lies down on it, and he does not get up.

Eight hundred years of people have found that beautiful.

I have read it every year since I was eleven and I find it beautiful too, and that is the part that frightens me.

28 • What I Did Not Do

Between the twenty-sixth meeting and the twenty-seventh there were five weeks, and in those five weeks I did nothing at all, and this is a chapter about that.

I did not warn anybody.

I did not go to the regulator. There was nothing to go with — the protocol is good, the consent flow is careful, the contraindications are real, and if I had walked into an office and said *I believe this product will work* they would have thanked me and shown me out.

I did not tell Iris.

I did not stop.

I did not remove the notebook from the drawer, and I did not cross out the fifth column, and I did not resign from a consultancy that pays four hundred euro a day and requires me to sit in a quiet room and answer questions honestly.

I went to work, twice a month, and I was helpful.

And in the fourth of those five weeks I sat down in my flat at seven in the evening, the way I have done since I was six, and I went to the garden, and I stood on the left near the wall with the water in front of me and something behind my shoulder, and I stayed there for a long time.

And I want to record what I did there, because it is the only thing I have done in this entire year that was not honest.

I tried to see whether it had changed.

I looked at the wall to see if the brick was different. I looked at the water. I walked toward the tree, which does what it always does. I did everything except turn round.

I was checking whether twelve strangers in a mill outside Utrecht had put a mark on it.

That is what I was doing. I want it written plainly. I went into the oldest place I have and I checked it for other people's fingerprints, like a woman going round a house after a party.

There were none. It is exactly as it was. It is exactly as it was when I was six and exactly as my father describes it and exactly as a man in Bremen describes it and exactly, in eleven cases out of twelve, as it was described by people who had never heard of any of us.

And I stood in it for a long time with a wall in front of me and nothing growing.

Mehmān said it is a room in a house that everybody lives in, and he is right, and I have known he is right since the ninth month.

Here is what he did not say and what I have worked out since, in a chair, on my own.

A room that everybody has and almost nobody enters is not a treasure. But it is not nothing either.

The village had it every afternoon for thirty-six years and they also had a wedding and a school and an evening when two hundred people sat down and went over each other's feet.

The twelve strangers had it for ninety minutes and then a man in a lanyard checked their pupils and they got the tram home.

And I have had it every day since I was six and I am forty and I live alone above a bicycle shop and my marriage ended because I was never actually there.

There is no version of this where the room is the problem.

The problem is what it is next to.

29 · Design Meeting, Final

Programme design, meeting twenty-seven. Two hours and fifty-eight minutes, and two board observers in the room. This is at the end.

Before we close, Iris says, this is the last design meeting before the regulatory submission, and she wants to do something that is not on the agenda.

Van Loon tells her to go on.

She says she wants everybody in the room to say, on the record, whether they think we should do it. Not whether it is safe. Whether we should.

Haller asks whether that is wise.

She says no, and to do it anyway. Then she says Thomas.

De Vries says yes — with the cap and the gap and the screening, yes. And he wants to say why in one sentence: he has watched twelve people in a room go somewhere in ninety minutes that he has been trying to reach for fourteen years, and he is not going to be the man who decided other people should not have that.

Okonkwo says yes. Same reasons. And she adds that they are not the last people who will build this, and if they do not, somebody will, and that somebody will not do the ninety-day gap.

Haller says yes, with the flow as written and not one word changed.

Meijer says yes. Adeyemi says yes. Troost says yes. Van Loon says yes. The observers say yes. It goes round the table and it does not slow down anywhere.

Then Iris says my name.

I tell her I am a consultant and I do not get a vote.

She says I get one today. Everybody in the room.

I do not say anything for a long time.

She says my name again.

And I say: yes.

Eleven seconds.

She asks whether I would say more than that.

And I say no.

All right, she says. Fourteen yes, none against. Minute it and let's go home.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani

I voted for it.

I have been sitting here for three hours and I am going to write the reason down and I am not going to make it look better than it is.

I did not vote yes because Thomas was right, although he was right, and I did not vote yes because somebody worse will build it, although somebody worse will.

I voted yes because I have read the account of a yard in 1947 in which seventy-one people put their hands up and voted to stay ill, and because the woman who wrote that account voted with them, and because she knew exactly why she did it and it was not mercy.

She voted to keep a village ill because eleven years earlier she had helped force a cure on a woman who did not want one, and she had signed her name to it, and she had been proud, and she spent the rest of her life settling that account with a hundred and six people who never knew she was doing it.

I have read that chapter perhaps thirty times. I have judged her every single time.

And today I sat in a room in a business park and voted yes on a thing I have been unhappy about for a year, and I did it in about four seconds, and when Iris asked me to say more I said no.

I did not vote for the product.

I voted so that I would still be in the room.

That is the whole of it. If I had voted against, I would have been thanked, and the contract would have run its course, and there would have been a leaving thing in a bar and I would never have been in that building again.

Nine people. Two days a month. A room with the blinds half down and nothing on the table.

Homa voted to protect the House.

I voted to protect my access to nine people.

And the difference between us is not moral, it is only that she wrote hers down at the time and I have taken eleven months to get here, and I am not sure she was any more honest than I am being now.

There is a sentence in her account that I have never got past. She wrote it about the vote and she wrote it in 1947.

I raised my hand.

Three words. She does not defend it. She sets out the reason, which is disgraceful, and then she writes three words and moves on to the next chapter.

I have just spent eleven hundred words on mine.



INTERLUDE

The Poem Itself

Nizami was commissioned. That is worth knowing.

A patron wrote to him and asked for the story of the Arab boy who went mad in the desert, and Nizami did not want to do it. He said so. He said the material was thin — no gardens, no feasts, no armies to

Speak of, just sand and a man talking to himself — and that he could not see how to make a poem out of it.

His son told him to take the commission. He took it. He wrote it in four months.

And the thing he made out of a story he did not want to write has outlived every poem he was enthusiastic about, and it is recited in countries he never heard of, and eight hundred years later a woman in Rotterdam has it in three editions on a shelf above a bicycle shop.

There is no lesson in that. I put it here because I like it and because it is the only part of this whole business where somebody makes a beautiful thing and it does not destroy anybody.

Although he did take the money.

30 • The Fourth Column

I want to explain the fourth column, because it is the part that will be misunderstood and because I have never written down how I actually arrive at those dates.

It is not mysticism. It is arithmetic and it is not even difficult.

I have watched about two hundred people over my adult life — Mehmān's, mostly, when I have been in Bremen, and now nine of my own. And there is a fairly reliable relationship between how a person meets the third thing in the first six months and how long it takes them to get through to the fourth on their own.

The people who get angry at it are quick. Anger means they are treating it as an opponent, and an opponent is a thing you can outlast. Haller was furious for eleven weeks and then stopped being furious and that is when I wrote 2031.

The people who get sad at it are slow. Sadness means they have believed it. If you believe the third thing when it tells you that you are wasting your life, you do not sit in the chair; you get up and try to stop wasting your life, and you come back in a month, and it tells you the same thing, and it is right again.

Iris gets sad.

She has done twenty minutes a day since the seventh of June without missing a day, which is better discipline than anybody I have taught, and every single time she meets the third thing she believes it, and she has believed it now perhaps two hundred times.

She will get there. She has the temperament of somebody who does not stop. But 2034 is optimistic and I knew it when I wrote it and I have not changed it, and I have started to understand why I have not changed it.

Because if I change it I have to write a different number, and a different number is a different date, and I would have to look at it.

* * *

Here is the arithmetic I have not put on the page and I am going to put it now.

If De Vries gets there in 2029 and Haller in 2031, they will be forty-two and fifty-eight. They will have children of eleven and nineteen and four. There will be evenings, at the ends of days, on the ends of beds.

That is not a plan. I have no plan. There is nothing in the fifth column and there is nobody I have spoken to about any of this except a man of seventy-four in Bremen who does not think I am doing anything wrong.

But I have written the dates down, in a notebook, in a hotel drawer in Utrecht, and I did not have to, and there is no professional reason for that column to exist.

Homa ruled five columns in 1938 and the fifth one was blank when she died.

Ozra ruled five columns in an exercise book and the fifth one was blank when they knocked the place down in 1974.

Mine is blank.

I have been telling myself for a year that the blankness is the proof that I have not decided anything.

It is beginning to occur to me that in a hundred and six years of this, in three notebooks, in two countries, in four generations —

nobody has ever filled it in, and it has never once stopped anybody.

PART SIX — THE FILE

31 • Launch

They launched The Room in three cities in September, invitation only, four hundred and twenty euro a session, and the waiting list was eleven thousand people long inside a fortnight.

I was not there. I want that on the record because I have been at everything else.

I was invited to the thing in the evening and I said I had a train and I did have a train, and Iris said *of course* in the particular way she says it when she has understood something and is not going to make you say it.

Here is what happened, as far as anybody can tell after four months.

It works. Roughly nine people in ten get to the fourth thing on their first session. Not something like it. It. The reports come back and they are my reports — the flat white light, the water they do not cross, the tree that stays where it is, the thing behind the shoulder that nobody turns round on. Some of them cry. Most of them do not.

Nobody has been hurt. That is not a small thing and I am not going to pretend it is. The screening works, the gap works, the attendants are good, and there have been four adverse events in four months, all of them mild, all of them written up properly, all of them people who should not have been screened in and were.

People love it. The reviews are not the reviews of a product. They are the reviews of a religious experience written by people trying to sound reasonable in public. The most present I have ever been. I finished a book. One woman wrote that she had sat with her mother for two hours and not once wanted to leave the room and that her mother had noticed and asked what was wrong.

And the second sessions are down.

That is the only number in the whole launch that nobody expected and nobody can explain, and it is the one I have been thinking about since November.

Of the first cohort, thirty-one per cent did not book a second session. Not because of a bad experience — the feedback from the non-returners is as good as everybody else's. They simply did not come back.

De Vries has a paper on it. Comms has a theory. Nobody has asked me and I have not offered, and I know exactly what it is, and I could have told them in a sentence at any point in the last four months.

They have been to the room. They have seen it.

And it is a dry garden with nothing growing in it and a wall you cannot get out of and something behind you that you are not going to turn round on, and thirty-one per cent of ordinary people went there once and looked at it and thought: *no thank you*.

They were not moved. They were not transformed. They went in, they had the most undivided ninety minutes of their adult lives, and they came out and got the tram home and did not book again, because they have a life and it has people in it and the garden is not better than that.

Thirty-one per cent of the general public is my brother.

I have been going every day for thirty-four years and it took strangers ninety minutes to make a judgement I have never once made.



INTERLUDE

After

There is no after in the poem. It stops at the grave.

But there is a thing the older manuscripts do that the printed editions mostly leave out, which is that they end with a list. The scribe, whoever he was, writes down where he got it — who told him, and who told that man, and who told him, back four or five names into the dark until it stops, not because the chain ends but because nobody wrote the next one down.

A boy went mad in a desert in the seventh century and somebody told somebody, and five hundred years later a poet in Ganja took a commission he did not want, and eight hundred years after that a

man in a flat outside Bremen tells it to two hundred people over eight months each, and a woman in Rotterdam has it in three editions on a shelf.

Nobody in that chain invented anything. Every one of them received it and passed it on and most of them thought they were only telling a story.

That is the whole mechanism. It has never needed anything else. No institution, no doctrine, no building, no money, and nothing anybody could point at and call a crime.

Somebody tells somebody, and it is beautiful, and it goes.

32 • What Iris Did Next

In January she resigned.

I found out the way everybody found out, which is a company-wide email of eleven lines written by somebody in Comms, in which she was thanked for four years of extraordinary work.

She rang me the same evening.

She said: *I wanted you to hear it from me and I've left it a day, which was cowardly.*

I said: why?

And Iris said: *Because it works.*

I did not understand and I said so.

She said: *Bahar, I took this job to get something back for Joost. In September I got him an invitation — I didn't tell you, I didn't tell anybody, I put him in the first cohort under a different surname and I sat in the car park for ninety minutes.*

And he came out, and he had been there. He described it to me in the car and he used your words and he had never met you.

And it was the best afternoon he's had in twelve years.

And in October he didn't book again.

And I asked him why, and my brother, who has not finished anything since he was fourteen, said: "it was amazing, but it's not

going to help, is it. I know what I'm like. It's not in there. It's out here."

And then he went out to see a girl he'd met and he was late and he did not text me for two days.

Bahar, I built the thing. I got it to him. It worked exactly as designed, and it did nothing, and he was right and I was wrong, and I have been wrong for four years in a way that has cost me most of my thirties.

I asked what she was going to do.

She said she did not know. She said she was going to have a summer.

And then she said the last thing she has ever said to me about any of it, and she said it lightly, on a phone, at the end of a call, in the way people say the thing they actually rang about.

She said: Do you know what I do now? Twenty minutes, every evening. Since June the seventh. Nine hundred and something days if you count them and I have counted them.

I've never told anybody that. Not Thomas, not my mother. Not you.

And I've never got anywhere. Not once. I sit there and at about eleven minutes I get this — I don't know what it is, it's like being told the truth about myself, and I get up.

Every single time. Two hundred and something times.

Why do I keep doing it?

And I said: because it isn't true.

There was a very long silence on that phone.

Then Iris said: You could have told me that any time in the last two years.

And I said: yes.

And she said: All right. And put the phone down.

33 • What I Have Been Doing

I am going to write this chapter as plainly as I can, without any arrangement, because these pages are the only true account of this that will ever exist and because I have spent two years being careful and I am tired.

Here is what I did.

In February of last year a company found me because I did well on a test I do not remember taking. In session five I understood two things: that they were going to build the product whatever I said, and that there was not one person in that building capable of paying attention to anything for more than a few seconds, including the woman interviewing me.

So when Iris offered me a consultancy I took it, and I took it for one reason, which was to be in a room with those people.

Since then I have attended twenty-seven design meetings and six intake sessions and I have spoken, by Iris's own count, for approximately one hundred and ninety hours.

I have never lied. Not once, not in the smallest thing. Every word is in a transcript and their own lawyer has read all four hundred hours of it and found nothing, because there is nothing.

And I have taught nine people to sit still, without ever telling them I was doing it, by answering their questions accurately and at length in quiet rooms with the blinds half down.

That is the whole mechanism. There is nothing else in it. Nobody has ever taught this any other way — you cannot teach it, you can only put somebody somewhere with nothing happening and keep them there until they notice, and my great-great-grandmother did it in 1943 by describing a garden to a frightened girl, and a man in Bremen does it with a story about a madman, and my father did it on the end of a bed, and I did it in a conference room in a business park for four hundred euro a day.

Four of the nine have taken it. De Vries in the fourth month, Haller in the sixth, Meijer in the ninth, Iris on the seventh of June, and Iris

is the only one who has told me and she did it on a telephone in January when it no longer mattered.

Three more will and I could tell you roughly when.

Two never will, and that is fine, and there is nothing wrong with them.

* * *

And at the back of this notebook there is a page ruled into five columns.

I have described them before and I am going to describe them again here, in one place, so that whoever finds this does not have to hunt.

Column one: a name. Nine of them.

Column two: the date of the first meeting at which that person was in a room with me.

Column three: the date I saw it take. Four filled in.

Column four: a date in the future. An estimate of when each of them, working alone, without help, will get through the third thing to the fourth. 2029. 2031. 2033. 2034. Five more that are guesses.

Column five is ruled and headed and empty. The heading is one word and I wrote it in Persian. It says after.

It is not for me to fill in. It is for their children.

* * *

I am forty-one years old and I did all of this deliberately and I have been telling myself for two years that I had not decided anything.

I ruled the columns in a hotel room in Utrecht on the night of the second half of session five, before I had agreed to anything, before I was offered the consultancy, before I knew there would be a consultancy.

I have gone back and checked the date four times because I wanted it to be later.

It is not later.



INTERLUDE

The Room

There is one line in the whole poem where Majnun explains himself

and it is not in the desert and it is not at the grave. It is early, when his father is still trying, and the boy is still a boy, and somebody asks him what he thinks he is doing.

And he says — and it is four words in the Persian and it takes eleven in English and every translator has done it differently —

I have found a room.

That is all. That is the only defence he ever offers and he never offers it again.

Not: I love her. Not: I cannot help it. Not: God has done this to me.

I have found a room.

And every person who has heard this story in eight hundred years has understood exactly what he means, and not one of them has been able to explain it to anybody who has not.

34 • Kian's Kitchen

I went out to Capelle on a Thursday in March, two years and one month after the first session, and I told my brother everything.

All of it. The columns, the nine names, the dates, the fifth column, what I did in that building for two years and why. It took about forty minutes and I did not make any of it sound better than it is.

He listened. He got up once for the kettle and came back and picked up where he was.

At the end he said: *Right.*

Then he said: *Are you going to get in trouble?*

I said no. I said there is nothing anybody could charge me with, and that I have not broken one rule, and that the worst that could happen is that somebody works it out and thinks badly of me.

And Kian said: *Then what's the problem?*

I said: I think I might have done something terrible.

And my brother said: *To who?*

And I could not answer him, and I sat in that kitchen and I could not answer him, because there is no one. Nine people are calmer and better at their jobs and one of them has become a man Iris would have a drink with. Nobody has been hurt. Nobody has been lied to. Nobody has been taken away from anybody or put in any room they did not walk into.

He said: *Look. I don't understand about ninety per cent of this and I'm not going to pretend. But I've known you forty-one years and I'll tell you what I think you're actually asking.*

You're not asking whether it was wrong. You're asking whether it's good.

And you've spent two years asking a company, and a bloke in Bremen, and Dad, and none of them are going to be able to tell you, because they've all got it as well.

Then he shouted upstairs for Mira, because he had been thinking about this for the whole of my forty minutes and because my brother is the cleverest of the three of us and has never once noticed.

She came down. She is eleven now. She is at the age where she does not want to be summoned and comes anyway.

Kian said: *Mira. Your auntie wants to ask you something about the garden.*

And Mira said, immediately, with the complete impatience of an eleven-year-old: *I don't really go any more.*

I said: since when?

And she said: *I dunno. Last year? I used to do it loads when I was little. I still do it sometimes if I can't sleep.*

I asked her why she stopped.

And my niece, who found it in a bedroom in Capelle at nine years old with nobody teaching her anything, who stands where a woman who died in 1968 stood, shrugged at me and said:

It's a bit boring in there?

And went back upstairs.

* * *

I sat in that kitchen for a while.

Kian put the football on and did not say anything and did not look at me, which was the kindest thing anybody has done for me in two years.

And after some time he said, without turning round:

She's fine, you know.

And I said I know.

And he said: *No — I mean it's not a thing she's got. It's a thing she does sometimes. Like when I was a kid and I used to hold my breath in the bath.*

And then, after a while: *Is it good?*

And I have an entire book's worth of answer to that question and I could not get one word of it out.

35 • What Happens Now

Nothing happens now. That is what I have to write and it has taken me four months to be able to.

The Room is in eleven cities. There has been one piece of serious journalism about it and it was fair. There are two competitors, and one of them is cutting corners on screening, and De Vries — who is still there, who will get to the fourth thing on his own in about five years — has been quietly briefing the regulator about them, which is the single most decent thing anybody in this account has done.

Thirty-one per cent still do not come back.

Iris is in Portugal. She sends me a photograph about once a month with nothing written on it.

Mehmān is seventy-six and has stopped teaching. He told me on the telephone in the spring, without any weight on it, that he had

finished. I asked him why and he said: *Because I have been thinking about what you said to me about the wedding.*

And then he said: *There were two hundred of them, Bahar. In thirty-six years. And I have never once had two of them in the same room.*

Your village had two hundred people in a bowl of ground and they saw each other every single evening.

I have had two hundred people in thirty-six years and I have made two hundred people who are alone in the afternoon.

I did not notice for a very long time.

My father is sixty-eight and still restores film two days a week and still goes to the shed, and I have started driving out on Sundays without a question in my pocket, and it turns out he will talk for hours.

I have not resigned from Lucent. My contract runs to the end of the year and I attend the review meetings and they are dull and there are four people in them and I answer their questions accurately.

And I go to the garden most evenings at about seven.

I want to say something about that and then I am going to stop.

I have not stopped. I did not stop after the twelve strangers, or after Mehmān said it was a room in a house that everybody lives in, or after a woman in a hotel room asked me whether she would have been asked, or after an eleven-year-old told me it was a bit boring in there.

I go. I stand on the left, near the wall. I do not cross the water.

I am not going to explain that. I have explained everything else in these pages, in order, plainly, including the parts that make me look exactly like what I am, and this is the one thing I am going to leave where it is.

36 • The File

Lucent Labs, records management. Retention notice, generated automatically, no signature.

The following material has been transferred to cold storage in accordance with the seven-year retention schedule.

Reference: Kamrani, B. Research intake and programme consultancy.

Contents: six intake session recordings, in video, audio and text. Twenty-seven programme design meeting recordings, in audio and text. One consultancy contract and four amendments. Expenses. Eleven photographs from a site visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran. One indexing analysis prepared by I. Vandermeer, unfiled. Correspondence.

Total: four hundred and eleven hours of audio-visual material and two thousand nine hundred and eight pages of text.

Legal review completed. No concerns.

This file has been archived. It will not be reviewed again unless requested.

* * *

From the notebook of B. Kamrani, final entry

Iris sent me the retention notice in June with three words at the top of it.

She wrote: *thought you'd want this.*

I have read it perhaps forty times and I cannot decide whether it is a kindness or the last and best thing she has ever done to me, and I have concluded that with her it was probably both and that she would not be able to separate them either.

Four hundred and eleven hours. Two thousand nine hundred and eight pages.

Every word of it true. Not one false statement anywhere in it. Legal review completed, no concerns.

And in it, in order, at length, patiently, in answer to questions asked by clever people who wanted to know — every single thing I know about this. What it is. What the four stages are and how long each one lasts and which one is the wall. What the third thing feels like and why it is not true. What is on the other side and why describing it is the surest way to stop somebody getting there. How it moves. How it has always moved.

Two years of a woman refusing to write a manual.

It is the most complete account of this that has ever existed and I made it, and it is sitting in cold storage in a business park outside Utrecht, and it will not be reviewed again unless requested.

I did not put it there. I want that clear. I answered questions honestly for two years and somebody else built the file and somebody else indexed it and somebody else pressed archive, and there is nobody to blame for any of it, which has been true of every single thing in this story since 1938.

Somebody will request it. Not soon. In eleven years, or twenty, when a company has been sold twice and a graduate is going through cold storage looking for something else.

And they will find four hundred hours of a calm woman explaining exactly how it is done.

* * *

There is one more thing and then I am finished.

I ruled the columns two years ago in a hotel room in Utrecht and I have written in three of them.

The fifth is still empty. The heading is one word in a language I do not really speak, and it says *after*, and there is nothing under it.

Homa ruled hers in 1938 and it was empty when she died in 1979.

Ozra ruled hers in an exercise book and it was empty when the bulldozers came in 1974.

Mine is empty tonight.

I have thought about that a great deal over the last months and I have worked out what it is, and it is not a plan and it is not a threat and it is not a promise.

It is a place somebody left for a thing they knew was going to happen and had decided not to be responsible for.

Four generations of us, in three notebooks, in two countries, and not one of us has ever written in it, and not one of us has ever crossed it out.

It is seven o'clock.

I am going to put this pen down now and go and sit in the chair by the window, the way I have every evening since I was six years old, and let it get boring, and go through the boring.

GLOSSARY

Bahar ba-HAAR — Persian. Spring; the season. The narrator, born 1982 in Rotterdam.

Chahārbāgh chaa-haar-BAAGH — Persian. Literally four gardens. The classical Persian walled garden: four quarters divided by watercourses, enclosed against the desert. The English word paradise descends from an Old Persian term meaning a walled enclosure.

Dariush daa-ree-OOSH — Persian. Darius. Bahar's father, born 1956 in a leprosy settlement outside Tabriz and taken out of it at five. A film restorer. He calls the practice going to the shed.

Ganja GAN-jeh — Persian, place name. A city in the historic Persian cultural sphere, now in Azerbaijan; the home of the poet Nizami.

Kamrani kam-raa-NEE — Persian. A family name, taken at adoption in 1962 from the filmmaker who carried a child out of the settlement.

Khāmūshī khaa-moo-SHEE — Persian. Silence; quietness; the state of being extinguished. The name given in the settlement to the condition entered in the flat hour of the afternoon, and to the practice that produces it.

Kian kee-YAAN — Persian. Of the Kayanian kings; royal. Bahar's brother, born 1987. A heating engineer.

Layli lay-LEE — Arabic, via Persian. Night. The woman at the centre of Nizami's poem, married against her wishes to a man she does not love, who lives an ordinary constrained life and is given a fraction of the lines.

Majnun maj-NOON — Arabic, via Persian. Possessed; a man with something else living in him. Not a name. What the town began calling the poet Qays after he went into the desert and did not come back.

Mehmān meh-MAAN — Persian. Guest; visitor; one who is received. The name given in the settlement to the presence that stands behind a person in the garden — and the name taken for himself by a man born there in 1949 who was never given one.

Mira MEE-ra — Slavic, via Dutch. Peace. Kian's eldest daughter.

Nawfal NAW-fal — Arabic. A warlord in Nizami's poem who takes pity on Majnun, raises an army to win Layli for him, succeeds, and is asked to disband.

Negāh ne-GAAH — Persian. A look; a glance; the act of looking at. The settlement's evening inspection, performed in pairs at sundown, in which each person's feet, shoes, hands, forearms and face were examined by another because their own bodies would not report injury to them.

Nizami Ganjavi ne-zaa-MEE gan-ja-VEE — Persian. Poet, c. 1141-1209. Author of the Khamsa, five long narrative poems, of which Layli va Majnun was written around 1188 on a commission he initially refused.

Qays GHAYS — Arabic. The poet's given name before the town stopped using it.

Sanam sa-NAM — Arabic, via Persian. An idol; in poetry, a beloved. Bahar's great-great-grandmother, of the settlement, died 1968.

Shahnameh shaah-naa-MEH — Persian. The Book of Kings, completed by Ferdowsi around 1010; the national epic of Iran and the longest poem written by a single author.

Tabriz tab-REEZ — Persian, place name. The principal city of north-western Iran, in the province of Azerbaijan.

Rotterdam. Bahar Kamrani is forty and restores film for a living. Every evening at seven she sits down in a chair by the window and goes somewhere. She has done it since she was six, when her father taught her on the end of her bed and was proud of the phrasing. She assumed everybody had somewhere.

Then a company finds her. They have run attention tests on four hundred thousand people, and forty-one of them sit off the end of the instrument — not high, off the instrument — and every one of the forty-one traces back to a village outside Tabriz that was demolished in 1974 and is a weighbridge now.

The instruction is three sentences long. She gives it away in the third session and it is almost useless, because it takes years and it mostly fails. So the company asks the better question, and the answer is that those people's bodies had stopped interrupting them, and that this can be reproduced. It works on nine people in ten in a single afternoon.

She spends two years in that building explaining, honestly and at length, in quiet rooms, exactly why this must not be done, while nobody in the company is able to attend long enough to notice what she is doing to them.

*The door is exactly where it always was,
in every chair in every room, and it costs nothing,
and nobody walks past it any more.*

