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THE ILLUMINATED FACE

چهره نورانی



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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

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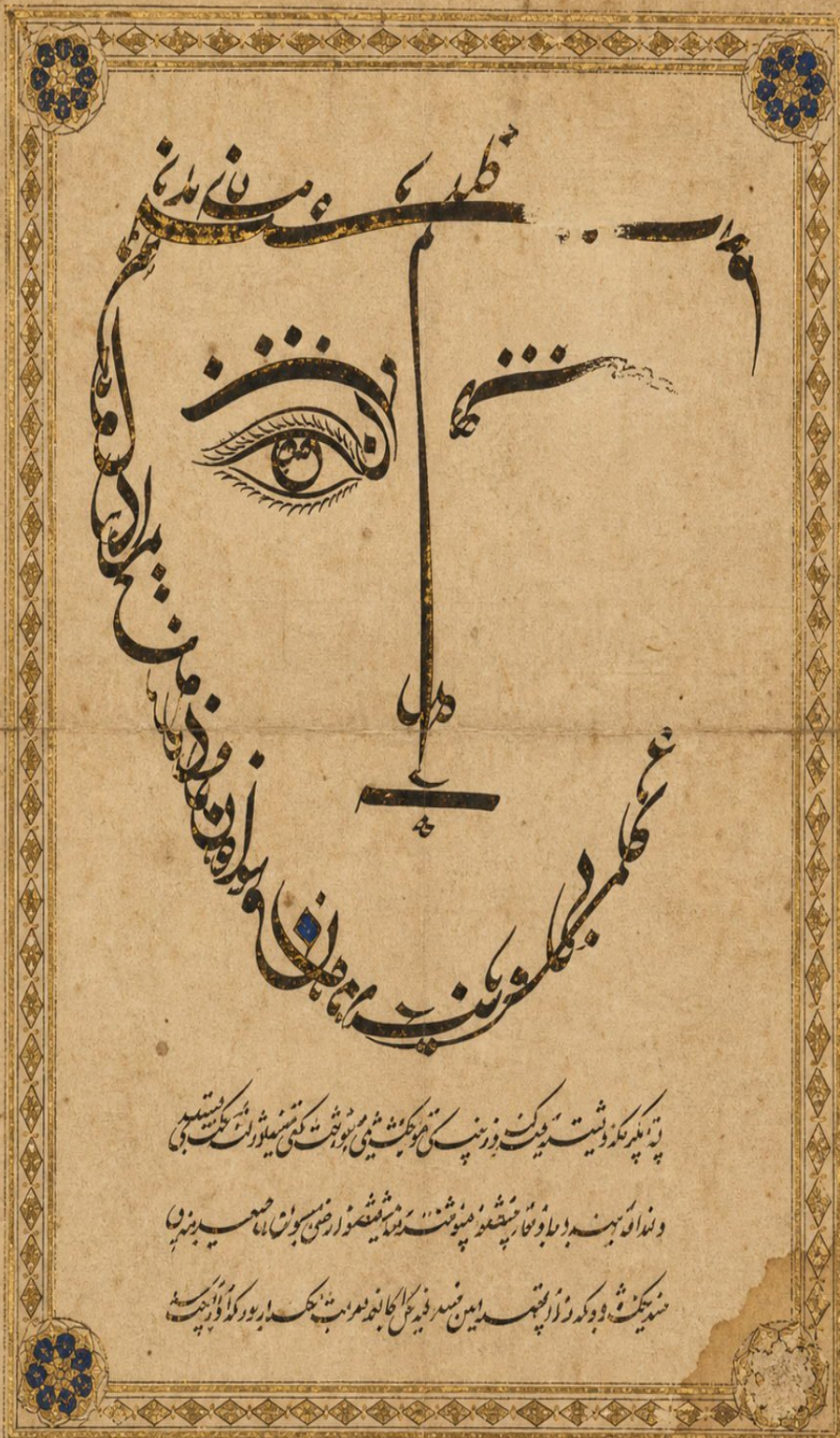
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کتابخانه
موزه
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په کله کوشیت دیکه ورنه پکشی خویشی می شویش که می شود که می شود
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SYNOPSIS

In a provincial Iranian city, three families keep a doctrine the world burned six hundred years ago. They believe the human face is not *like* scripture. It *is* scripture — fourteen lines of divine writing, seven inherited from Eve and seven from Adam, an alphabet laid out in hair and bone.

Mansur Sarmadi is their reader. When one of them dies, he reads the face aloud, and the reading is the funeral.

Then his wife's face begins to fail. First one side goes slack. Then a clean vertical groove opens down her brow — the *alif*, the first letter, the stroke of unity — and the hollowing begins, taking her seven lines one at a time. Doctrine has no provision for a corrupted text, only for a false one. So Mansur begins reading her in secret while she sleeps, and finds that the new lines say something better than the old ones ever did.

His people discover the notebook and do not condemn him. They cannot. Six hundred years ago they traded away every instrument of prohibition for the freedom of believing themselves already in the garden. They ratify him — and his dying wife becomes a text under study, visited, photographed, transcribed by strangers in her own front room.

Then Mansur learns what his people have been doing while he read the dead: that the clinic on the ring road where every girl in the city has her nose taped belongs to them, has belonged to them for four generations, and that they do not consider this blasphemy. They consider it copying.

And in the ledger, in a hand he taught himself to imitate as a boy, is his wife's file. Age nineteen. Four months before he was introduced to her.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I came to this by way of a single sentence, read late at night and not believed at first: that there were people who held the human face to be not a symbol of scripture but scripture itself. Not a metaphor a poet reaches for. The actual text. Ink and page.

The doctrine is real. Fazlallah Astarabadi was born in the city we now call Gorgan around 1340, had a vision in Tabriz in the fasting month of 1374, wrote the Book of Eternity in his own provincial dialect, and had his head taken off at a mountain fortress twenty years later. His greatest poet was flayed alive in Aleppo. A rebel of the movement was skinned in Isfahan. In 1441 some five hundred of them were burned in Tabriz, and among them was Fazlallah's daughter, who had preserved her father's book by copying it out by hand.

I did not have to invent the pattern. It is simply there in the record: a people who said *the face is the writing of God*, and a world that answered them, over and over, by removing faces.

What drew me was not the persecution. It was the arithmetic. Seven lines issued at birth to every child on earth, seven more arriving with the beard, and among those second seven — the hair in each nostril. A doctrine of beauty would have taken the jaw, the eye, the bow of the lip. This one took nostril hair, because it was not looking at faces the way we look at faces. It was looking for marks. For places where the body reliably lays down a stroke of dark against pale.

It was never about looks. And yet within one generation the poets had it, and were finding the seven verses of the opening chapter in the face of the beloved, and the beloved is always beautiful. That gap — between a doctrine of legibility and a culture that will only ever read the well-printed ones — is the whole of this book.

The rest followed from a question I could not put down. If the face is the writing, then what is a surgeon? We live in the century in which the human face became editable, at scale, cheaply, and

largely for the young. Iran performs more of these operations per head than almost anywhere on earth, and the tape across the bridge of the nose is worn openly, sometimes by people who have not had the operation at all. A doctrine that says the face is a divine manuscript has to say something about that. And when I worked out what it would have to say — that a letter added by a man in good faith cannot be told from a letter written by God, because the founder himself established exactly that about four letters of the Persian alphabet — the book stopped being a book about a strange sect and started being a book about my own century.

The body is the last honest witness. That is the line I keep returning to in these publications, and it is not quite true, and this novella is the argument against it. The body does not lie, but it can be written on, and we have got very good at writing on it, and there is no instrument anywhere in creation that reads back the difference.

This is a book about a man who spends his life reading and never once asks whether the page was authored. I do not think he is unusual. I think he is most of us, most of the time, with a better vocabulary.

Grief runs underneath all of it, and I have not tidied it. Sanam is ill from the fifth chapter to the last and she is never cured and she is never ennobled by it. Her illness does not hurt her and it does not make her wise. It simply takes, on one side, patiently, for fourteen months, while the people who love her hold a scholarly disagreement about what she means.

I have left the ending where it belongs, which is with you.

Chew Z

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PART ONE — THE SCALP LINE

the first maternal line, from Eve

1

Here is how you read a dying man.

You do not stand at the foot of the bed. The foot of the bed is where doctors stand, and doctors read a different document. You bring a chair to the right side, close enough that your knees touch the frame, and you sit so that his face and your face are at the same height, because a text held above you is a text you will flatter and a text held below you is a text you will condescend to. Level. Always level. Ostad Rafi'i [os-TAAD ra-fee-EE] — *ostad* is what you call your teacher in this country, and there is no good English for it; it means the man who taught you your trade and to whom you will never stop owing it — Ostad Rafi'i used to put a folded coat under me when I was a boy because my legs were short and the beds in this city are high.

You wait for the family to stop talking. They never stop on their own. Someone has to say the first words of the *Fatiha* [FAA-teh-heh] — the opening chapter of the Qur'an, seven verses, and there is a reason we begin there that I will come to — and then the room goes quiet the way a room goes quiet when a needle is set on a record.

Then you look at his hairline.

Not his eyes. Everyone looks at the eyes and the eyes are not writing, they are only wet. The hairline is writing. It is the first of the lines, the highest stroke on the page, and in a man of eighty-one it will have retreated and thinned and forked and gone grey in a pattern that is his and no one else's on this earth, and that pattern is a letter, and the letter has a value, and the value has a meaning, and the meaning is what you have come to say aloud in front of his children.

That night in Kordkuy [kord-KOO-ee] the man was named Hasan Dastgheib [ha-SAN dast-GHAYB] and he had four days left, though nobody had told him and he had told everybody. His hairline had gone back to the crown on the left and stopped dead on the right, an unequal retreat, a shoreline where the sea had taken one bay and left the other. I read it as *ha* [HAA]. Eight. The letter that opens

his own name and also opens the word for truth, and I said so, and his daughter put the back of her hand against her mouth.

That is the whole trade. That is what I do and what my father did and what his mother did before him.

A word about what we are, since you will want to know and since nobody has ever said it plainly in print.

We are Hurufis [hoo-ROO-feeZ]. *Huruf* [hoo-ROOF] is Arabic for letters — the letters of the alphabet — and a Hurufi is a person who believes the alphabet is not a tool for describing God but the substance God is made of. Twenty-eight letters in Arabic. Thirty-two in Persian. Everything that exists was spoken into existing, and a spoken thing is made of sounds, and sounds are made of letters, and therefore the whole created world, the mountains and the Caspian and the mould on the north wall of my kitchen, is text.

And the human face is the page where the text is largest.

Not *like* a page. This is the part where people nod politely and go away having misunderstood, so let me stop and put my hand flat on the table. Poets have been saying for a thousand years that the beloved's face is like a book, that her brows are like the letter *nun*, that her mouth is like a *mim*. That is decoration. That is a man reaching for something pretty to say to a girl in a courtyard.

We do not mean like.

We mean that if you had been present at the beginning and had asked to see the writing, you would have been shown a face. We mean that the lines on your father's forehead are not evidence of a text, they are the text, they are ink, and when he dies the ink dries and no one will ever read that particular sentence again in the history of the world. We mean that scripture is not kept in mosques. It is kept in houses, it is kept in prisons, it is kept in the beds of hospitals in provincial cities, and it walks around all day being ignored by everyone including itself.

Six hundred years ago there were tens of thousands of us. There was a rebellion. There were several. In this city, in this province, in the fifteenth century, there were enough of us that the men with

the fatwas had to sit down and do arithmetic about how many they would need to burn.

Now there are three families.

* * *

I drove home from Kordkuy at one in the morning with the heater failing and the fog coming up off the flats the way it does here, thick and low and the colour of unwashed wool, so that the road appears one dashed white line at a time and you take it on faith that the line will keep being offered. I have driven that road four hundred times. I have driven it after readings that broke me open and after readings that were nothing, a tired old page, a life that had said very little and said it clearly.

Sanam had left the kitchen light on.

She was asleep at the table with her cheek on her forearm and the ledger open, because she kept the ledger, the who-died-and-when-and-what-was-said, in a hand so small and even that Tuba Khanum once held a page up to the window and said it was the only handwriting in the lineage that looked like it had been printed by a machine that loved you.

I stood in the doorway with my coat on and I read my wife's face for the four thousandth time.

The scalp line, high and unbroken, no retreat at all at forty-four, a full clean stroke from temple to temple like the top rule of a page. The brows heavy and level. The lashes — four sets, upper and lower, right and left — dark and thick enough that she never wore anything on them and never had.

Seven lines. Not fourteen. She would never have fourteen. No woman ever has.

I will explain that. It is the ugliest thing in the doctrine and I am not going to hide it from you, but not yet, because at that moment I was not thinking about doctrine. I was thinking that she had left the light on for me and fallen asleep under it, and that in twenty-four years I had never once come home to a dark house.

I woke her badly and she said a name that was not mine, some dream, and then she laughed and put her hand over her eyes.

Ten weeks later that hand would not be able to close.

2

Tuba Khanum brought me the girl on a Thursday, in the rain, without warning, which is how Tuba Khanum has done everything for the fifty years I have known her.

“Golnaz Ehsani [gol-NAAZ eh-saa-NEE],” she said. “Nineteen. She reads better than you did at nineteen.”

“Everyone read better than I did at nineteen.”

“Yes,” said Tuba Khanum, and sat down and took the good chair.

The girl stood in the hall with rain in her hair and her shoes still on, which no one in this country does, and I understood immediately that she was frightened and had decided to be rude instead. Her face was — I am going to be careful here, because of what comes later, and because I want you to see exactly what I saw and exactly what I did not.

Her face was a clean copy. That is the phrase we use and I want to explain it before it starts doing damage.

We do not say beautiful. We are the only people in the world who look at faces professionally and have no word for beautiful, and this confuses everyone, and the confusion has killed people. What we say is *legible* [in Persian, *khwana* [khaa-NAA], readable]. A legible face is one where the fourteen lines — or in a woman the seven — are distinct from each other and from the ground, where the brow does not run into the lash and the lash does not run into the shadow, where a reader coming to it cold can say with confidence *this is where this line begins and this is where it ends*.

That is a property of contrast and edge. It has nothing to do with proportion. It has nothing to do with whether the arrangement pleases you.

You can have a face that would stop traffic and read like water. You can have a face that makes children go quiet — a burn, a palsy, a

jaw carried wrong since birth — and every line on it can be so sharp and so separate that reading it is like being handed a book with the pages cut for you.

So: her face was a clean copy. Sharp brow, sharp lash, high contrast, easy ground. I could have read her across a room in bad light.

I did not know then that this was because a woman I had not yet met had made her that way with a blade, in a room off the ring road, for eleven million tomans, when Golnaz was seventeen and had begged her mother for a year.

I want to be fair to myself. There was no way to know. That is the entire problem and it will be the entire problem for the rest of this book: **there is no way to know**. Fazlallah himself, six hundred years dead, wrote the sentence that makes it unknowable, and he wrote it thinking he was closing a hole, and instead he opened the one I fell through.

But that is chapter twenty-nine. On the Thursday, in the rain, I only thought: *good, this will be easy, I am tired, let it be easy*.

"Take your shoes off," I said.

She took them off.

"What did you see first?"

"Your wife," she said. "In the kitchen. She looked at me."

"That is not what I asked."

"You asked what I saw first."

Tuba Khanum, from the good chair, made a small sound like a kettle deciding.

I took the girl into the back room where my father read and his mother read, and I sat her at the table under the north window, which is the only light in this house that does not lie, and I gave her the first lesson, which has been the first lesson since before Persia had a Persian alphabet.

"There are seven lines that you have had since you were born," I said. "Name them."

"The hair on my head. Both eyebrows. Four sets of lashes — upper and lower, each eye."

"That is seven. They are called *khutut-e ummiya* [kho-TOOT-eh om-MEE-yeh]. The maternal lines. Ummya from *umm* [OOM], mother. The doctrine holds that they descend to you from Eve, and that every child born anywhere on earth arrives with all seven, and that no other feature on the human body is issued so completely and so early."

"And the other seven?"

I did not answer that for a moment, because through the wall I could hear Sanam running the tap, and because the honest answer to that question is the reason this doctrine has never spread and never will.

"The other seven," I said, "arrive with the beard."

PART TWO — THE RIGHT BROW

3

The other seven are called *khutut-e abiya* [kho-TOOT-eh a-BEE-yeh]. The paternal lines. From *ab* [AB], father. They descend from Adam and they arrive at puberty and here they are, all seven, and I want you to hear them in order because the order is the point:

The hair down the right side of the face. The hair down the left side of the face. The right half of the moustache. The left half of the moustache. The hair in the right nostril. The hair in the left nostril. The tuft between the lower lip and the chin.

Read that list again.

Nostril hair.

I have watched this land on perhaps thirty people in my life, initiates and outsiders both, and it lands the same way every time: a pause, and then a small movement of the mouth that the person tries to suppress. They think they have caught us being ridiculous. They are about to be polite about it.

What they have actually caught is the only honest thing in the entire system.

Because think about what a doctrine of beauty would have done with those seven slots. It would have taken the line of the jaw. It would have taken the shape of the eye, the bridge of the nose, the bow of the upper lip — it would have taken exactly the seven things that every love poem in this language has been taking for a thousand years. That is what a doctrine of beauty looks like. We know what one looks like. We are surrounded by one.

Fazlallah took nostril hair.

He took it because he was not looking at faces the way you look at faces. He was looking for *marks*. For places where the body reliably grows hair — everywhere, on everyone, without being asked — and so lays down a stroke of dark against pale. A line. An inking. And the nose reliably does that, in every man of every people, and so it is in, and the jaw is out, because the jaw is a shape and shapes are not letters.

This is the single fact that I would put on the wall of every room where our doctrine is discussed, and I would put it there in a large hand:

It was never about looks.

It was about whether a line is present and whether you can see where it stops.

* * *

Now the arithmetic, and I will go slowly, because the arithmetic is what makes the doctrine a doctrine rather than a hobby.

Seven maternal and seven paternal is fourteen. Fourteen matters for a reason outside the face: there are twenty-nine chapters of the Qur'an that open with letters standing alone, letters that spell no word, that sit at the top of the page saying nothing — *alif lam mim, ta ha, ya sin*. Every commentator for eight hundred years had filed them under the obscure verses, the ones whose meaning God has kept. Fazlallah moved them to the clear ones. And when you strip out the repeats, those disconnected letters number exactly fourteen.

Fourteen letters that mean nothing on the page. Fourteen lines that mean nothing on the face. He put them together and said: they are the same fourteen, and neither of them is silent, and the reason you cannot read them at the top of the chapter is that you have been reading in the wrong place. Go and look in a mirror.

Fourteen doubled is twenty-eight, which is the Arabic alphabet entire.

Then four more, which is the part I will need you to remember in a year's time when a woman in a white coat says it back to me in a consulting room and I have nothing to answer her with.

Persian has thirty-two letters. Arabic has twenty-eight. The four extra ones — *pe, che, zhe, gaf* — exist because Persian has four sounds that Arabic does not, and scribes centuries after the Prophet took existing Arabic letters and added dots to them and made new ones. That is the historical account. That is what any philologist will tell you and any philologist is right.

Fazlallah denied it.

Not the history — he was not a stupid man, he could see the dots. He denied the *conclusion*. He held that the thirty-two are the thirty-two pre-eternal words, the names taught to Adam before there was time, and that when those scribes sat down and improvised four letters they were not inventing anything. They were remembering. Their hands were being run. The four that look added are not added; they were always there and merely arrived late, and there is no test, no instrument, no reading anywhere in the world that can distinguish a letter God wrote from a letter a man added in good faith.

And to prove it he pointed at the mouth: thirty-two teeth. Not twenty-eight. God did not put twenty-eight teeth in your head and then let the Persians add four.

I taught Golnaz that on her third day and she said, “So the fake ones are real.”

“There are no fake ones. That is what it means.”

“That is not what it means,” she said. “It means you can’t tell.”

I remember laughing. I remember thinking, this one is going to be difficult, and being pleased about it, the way you are pleased when a student is going to cost you something.

* * *

Sanam came in with tea while we were on the thirty-two and stayed to listen, standing, one hip against the doorframe, because she had heard it four hundred times and liked it anyway, the way you like a song you have worn out.

“Ask him the woman question,” she said to Golnaz.

Golnaz looked at me.

“Ask it,” I said.

“Women only have seven.”

“Yes.”

“Forever.”

"Yes."

"So a woman is half a text."

Sanam said, without any particular heat, in the voice she used for the neighbours: "A woman is half a text, and it will be a man who tells you what the half says."

Then she put the tray down and went out and I heard her in the kitchen turn the radio on, and Golnaz sat there with her hands flat on the table and did not ask me anything else for the rest of the afternoon.

I want to record that I did not defend the doctrine at that moment. I have gone over it many times since. I had the defence ready — I have always had it ready, it is the standard one, that the maternal seven are the older and purer set, that Eve's letters were given before Adam's were earned, that in the reading of the dying it is almost always the maternal lines that carry the sentence and the paternal that carry the ornament. All of that is in the books. All of it is arguable. Some of it I still think is true.

I said nothing, because my wife had walked out of the room, and because in twenty-four years I had learned that the argument was not one I could win in the kitchen.

Eight days later she woke up and the right side of her mouth would not come with her.

4

THE FIRST RECITATION

Delivered at the house of Tuba Khanum, on the fourth night of the month in which he died, before the households of the three families and two children who were too young for it, as it has been delivered in this province for six hundred years.

* * *

He was a merchant's son from this city.

Not from Tabriz, not from Isfahan, not from any of the places where a man is supposed to become a prophet. From here. From

Astarabad [as-taa-raa-BAAD]. That is the old name of the city you are sitting in. The maps say Gorgan [gor-GAAN] now, and have said Gorgan since your grandmother was a girl, and that is the whole reason nobody outside these three families connects the founder of our doctrine with the town where they buy their bread.

His name was Fazlallah [fazl-ol-LAAH]. It means the generosity of God. He was born around the year the plague came the second time, into money, and he was expected to take the business.

He did not take the business. He was one of those young men — you have met one, every generation has one — who reads Rumi at fourteen and is ruined by it. He went out to the dervishes — the wandering poor men of the Sufi orders, who own one bag and no house and are fed by strangers. He gave things away. And what he was chiefly known for in those years was not preaching, because he did not preach yet, but *dreams*: his own and other people's. People brought him their dreams the way you bring a doctor a cough. He became, in his twenties, the best-regarded interpreter of dreams in the northeast of this country, and he was still nobody, and he would have died nobody.

In Tabriz, in the fasting month, in the year that we count as 1374 in the calendar the foreigners use, he stopped being nobody.

He called what happened to him *zuhur-e kebriya* [zo-HOOR-eh keb-ree-YAA]. The manifestation of glory. He never described the event itself. Six hundred years of us and we do not know what he saw, whether it came at night or in the afternoon, whether he was alone. He described only what he was given, and what he was given was a key: that the letters standing silent at the heads of twenty-nine chapters were not silent, were not obscure, were not held back — that they were the clearest verses in the book, and that the reason no one could read them was that everyone had been looking at paper.

And then he did the thing that makes him ours rather than one more ecstatic with a following.

He wrote it down.

He wrote the *Javdan-nama* [jaa-vee-DAAN naa-MEH], the Book of Eternity, and he wrote it in the dialect of this province, in the language of this valley, in words that a Tabrizi could barely follow and a Baghdadi could not follow at all. Scholars have called this a mistake for six centuries. It was not a mistake. He was saying: the revelation is local. It is in the mouth you already have. You do not have to go anywhere.

You do not have to go to Mecca. You do not have to go to Karbala [kar-ba-LAA], where the grandson of the Prophet was killed and where half this country would go tomorrow if it could. You do not have to cross a single river.

The alphabet is already on you. It came with the body. It was issued at birth, seven lines of it, and topped up at fifteen, and it has been sitting on the front of your head your whole life being looked at by everyone you have ever met and read by no one.

That is what the man from this city said.

They took his head off for it twenty years later and we will come to that.

Here the recitation ends, and the tea is brought, and no one speaks for the length of time it takes to pour eleven glasses.

PART THREE — THE LEFT BROW

It started with a drinking glass.

She was holding it in her right hand at half past six in the morning and the water came out of the right side of her mouth and went down her chin and onto her front, and she said a word I had heard her say perhaps four times in twenty-four years, and put the glass down, and pressed the back of her wrist against her lips, and looked at me.

"Say something," she said.

"You said something."

"No. You say something. I want to see if I can smile."

She could not smile. Half of her could. The right side of her face had come off the rope. The corner of the mouth, the fold beside the nose, the whole business a face uses to say *I am joking* — gone, on that side, in the night, without a sound, while I slept next to her.

And the eye.

The right eye would not close.

That is the thing nobody warns you about, because everyone imagines the slack mouth and nobody imagines the eye. She would blink and the left lid would come down and the right would come down halfway and stop, and the eye would sit there, wet, exposed, looking at me out of a face that was doing something else entirely.

We drove to the hospital in Gorgan in the dark with the heater failing.

* * *

The doctor was about thirty and very tired and very kind and she said the word to us within four minutes.

I am not going to write the word down. Not now and not later. In this book you will get the slack side, the sword-cut, the hollowing, the thinning ground — you will get what a reader sees, because a reader is what I am, and because the names doctors use are a

different alphabet with a different god and I refuse to hand my wife over to it in a book that is about her face.

But the thirty-year-old doctor said the word, and then she said the thing that we held onto for eleven weeks like a rope in water:

“Most people get most of it back. Six weeks. Sometimes ten.”

She put Sanam on steroids and gave her eye drops for the eye that would not close and a small clear patch to tape it shut at night, and she said the word *idiopathic*, which I did look up, and which turns out to mean: this happens and we do not know why.

I want to be exact about what I felt in that room, because I have been dishonest about it in my own head for a long time and this is where I stop.

I felt fear. Of course.

And underneath the fear, in the same second, moving fast and low like something under ice, I felt: *the right brow has dropped four millimetres and the lash line has changed angle and I do not know what it says now.*

I would like to tell you that I was ashamed of that. I was not ashamed of it for another five months. At the time it seemed to me the most natural thing in the world, in the way that a doctor whose wife falls ill notices her colour before he notices his own heart.

That is what I told myself.

It is not the same. A doctor's noticing is in service of the woman. Mine was already in service of something else.

* * *

She was very good about it for eleven weeks.

She taped the eye at night and made a joke about the tape. She learned to drink from the left corner. She got a straw and then decided the straw was undignified and went back to the glass and simply turned her head, and told the neighbours she had slept in a draught, which is what everyone in this country says, and everyone in this country accepts it.

She would not let me read her.

I asked once, in the second week, in what I thought was a light voice, and she said, "No," and went on peeling an orange with one hand and her teeth.

"It might—"

"Mansur. No."

"You have never once said no."

"I have never once been a text you wanted to read," she said. "You have read me the way a man reads the back of a cereal box. Now I am interesting. No."

I did not have an answer to that. I have not found one since.

6

At week eleven the doctor said, "Hm," and stopped writing.

The mouth had come back about a third of the way. The eye was closing to perhaps three-quarters. And that, apparently, is not the shape of the curve. The curve is supposed to be a bad month and then a rising line and then, one morning, an unremarkable face doing unremarkable things. It is not supposed to be a third and then a plateau and then, on the right temple, a groove.

The groove was new that week. Neither of us had mentioned it because each of us had decided the other had not seen it.

She had them run the scans. It took until the end of the month to get a slot and eleven days after that to get the reading, and in those eleven days I did something I had never done in my life, which is that I lied to Tuba Khanum. She asked how Sanam was and I said improving.

I want to explain why I lied, because it was not to protect Sanam.

It was because our doctrine has no provision for what was happening.

Let me lay this out plainly, because everything after this follows from it, and if I do not get it into your hands now then nothing I do later will make any sense.

We read faces. A face is scripture. Very well. Now: what do you do with a *bad* face?

We have an answer for that, and it is a good answer, and it is six hundred years old. A face with poor contrast, a face where the ground is thick and the lines blur into it, a face obscured by fat or by scar or by an unlucky arrangement of bone — that is a hard manuscript. A cramped hand. Bad ink, thin paper, a scribe in a hurry. The text is not wrong. The text is *hard to read*, which is a fact about you and your light and your patience, and not a fact about God. You sit closer. You wait for better light. You come back tomorrow. Nobody in six hundred years has ever suggested that an ugly man is heresy.

And we have an answer for a *false* face, which is the great crime and which I will get to, and which I did not think about once in those eleven days because it did not occur to me that it could have anything to do with my wife.

But a face that is *changing*?

A face where the lines were one thing on Tuesday and are another thing by Friday, and will be a third thing by Ramadan?

There is nothing. I have read the *Javdan-nama* in the poor Persian summary and in as much of the valley dialect as I can manage. I have read Firishteoglu [fee-rish-teh-OH-loo], the man who put the whole thing into Turkish sixty years after the founder died, and whose version my father made me learn for exactly this reason. I have been through every commentary that the three families hold, and we hold a great many, because when you are the last of something you keep everything.

There is nothing on a text that revises itself.

Six hundred years of men who believed the face was God's handwriting, and not one of them wrote down what to do when the handwriting moves.

You see the shape of the hole. I saw it at the time and I told myself I was seeing a scholarly gap, an unaddressed case, a footnote for the lineage.

Here is what was actually in the hole, and I was not able to look at it for another year:

If the face is God's writing — then whatever changes the face is God writing.

Not permitting. Not testing. Not punishing.

Writing.

Which means the thing eating my wife's face was not an interruption of the scripture. It was the scripture continuing. It was the pen still moving. And every prayer I might make for her recovery — every single one, in any language, at any hour — was a request that God stop writing and put back what He had crossed out.

I did not think that thought in week eleven. I want to be accurate. In week eleven I stood in a corridor and lied to a seventy-one-year-old woman about my wife's recovery, and told myself it was kindness, and drove home, and did not turn on the light in the kitchen because Sanam was asleep, and stood in the dark for a while, and went to bed.

But the thought was already in the house. It had come in with the tape on her eye. It sat in the corner of every room I was in for the next fourteen months, and it was patient, and it did not need me to look at it, because it knew perfectly well that I would.

PART FOUR — THE UPPER RIGHT LASHES

The groove came down her forehead over about nine weeks, and by the end of the winter you could lay a matchstick in it.

It ran from just inside the hairline, a little right of the middle, down past the inner end of the right eyebrow, and stopped. It was not a wrinkle. A wrinkle is a fold and folds have a fat side and a thin side and they move when you move. This did not move. It was a line where the ground had gone from underneath the skin, so that the skin lay down into the place where something used to be, and it was pale, and it had a clean edge on both sides, and it did not go away when she raised her brows or slept or cried.

They have a name for it in the hospital. They call it a sword-cut, which is the only honest thing the other alphabet has ever said about this illness, and I have used their name ever since because it is better than mine would have been.

Here is what it is, in my words, since I promised you my words.

The ground under her face was thinning. Not the skin — the padding, the quiet fat and the sheet of muscle and, eventually, the bone itself, on the right side only, in a slow drift downward and outward from that first line. It does not hurt. That is the part people cannot hold in their heads. It never once hurt her. It simply took, at a rate you could not see by looking but could see by photographs eight weeks apart, and it took only from the right, and it stopped exactly at the middle of her face as though something had drawn a border and honoured it.

The middle of the face. Where the border ran.

I need to tell you about the middle of the face and I need you to forgive me for how this is going to sound.

There is a line down the centre of every human face. Down the brow, down the ridge of the nose, through the notch of the lip, over the chin. It is not one of the fourteen. It is not a letter at all. In our books it is called the *khatt-e istiva* [khat-teh es-tee-VAA] — the line of settling — and the word comes out of the Qur'an, out of the verse that says of God that He settled upon the throne, *istawa*

[es-ta-VAA], and which Fazlallah read as meaning that the throne is the form of Adam and the settling is the fact of the face.

The line of settling is where God sits.

Not a letter. The place from which the letters are read. The spine of the page, the fold, the axis the whole document is hung on.

And in the first week of that spring, with the light coming back and the fog off the flats in the mornings, my wife's illness opened a clean vertical stroke down the top of the line of settling and then began, from that stroke, to take the right-hand page.

There is a letter that looks exactly like that stroke. *Alif* [a-LEEF]. The first letter. A single vertical mark, no curve, no dot, nothing to decorate it, and its value in the counting is one, and it is the letter that stands for unity, for the one, for the beginning of the alphabet and the beginning of everything the alphabet was used to say.

You draw it by putting the pen down at the top and pulling straight down and lifting.

It is the mark a scribe makes first when he is testing a new pen.

* * *

I did not say any of this to her.

I said none of it to Tuba Khanum either, or to Golnaz, who came twice a week and had begun to arrive with food her mother had cooked, which is what this city does instead of asking.

I said it to a notebook.

I bought the notebook in a stationer's near the bazaar on a Tuesday, and I remember standing in the shop for a long time choosing between two of them, one with a soft cover and one with a hard one, and thinking about which would survive better, and only realising on the pavement outside what that thought had been for.

You do not choose a durable notebook for a private grief.

You choose a durable notebook for a *record*.

8

THE SECOND RECITATION

Delivered at the house of Tuba Khanum, on the sixth night, before the same room, one of the children having been kept home with a fever.

* * *

He tried to convert Timur.

That is the sentence that ends the first part of our history and every one of us has heard it since we were four years old, and I have never once heard it said with anything but a kind of exhausted love, the way a family talks about the uncle who put the money into the wrong bank.

Understand what he was doing. He had a doctrine that said the divine is on your face and the pilgrimage is unnecessary and the letters are the substance of the world, and he had it in a book, and he had perhaps a few thousand followers in Isfahan and Khorasan [kho-raa-SAAN] and Shirvan [sheer-VAAN] and Baku, and he looked around at the fourteenth century and made a perfectly rational decision: **convert the man with the army.**

He wrote to Timur [tee-MOOR] — the conqueror the Europeans call Tamerlane, who at that moment owned everything between here and India. He made overtures. He wanted an audience.

You may imagine the letter. We do not have it.

What we have is what Timur's son did about it.

The son's name was Miranshah [mee-raan-SHAAH]. He was the governor of Azerbaijan and by every account including his own family's he was going mad in those years, and he took Fazlallah at a fortress called Alinja [a-leen-JAA], in Nakhchivan [nakh-chee-VAAN], up in the mountains of the far northwest, in the year 1394.

He had him beheaded.

Now.

I am going to stop the recitation here, as my father stopped it, as his mother stopped it, and say the thing that we say at this point in the story and that we have never once written down, because it is the reason we recite this at all rather than simply reading it out of a history.

Fazlallah taught that the face is the throne of God and the whole scripture of creation.

And the punishment that was chosen for him, out of all the punishments available in that century — and there were many, and Miranshah knew them — was the one that takes the face off the body.

Nobody planned that. Miranshah was not making a point about doctrine. He was a violent man in a violent province and it was the ordinary sentence.

But it happened. It is the first time it happened.

It is not the last time it happened, and when we recite in two nights' time you will hear it happen again, and in four nights' time you will hear it again, and the last time you hear it, it will not be a face that is taken but a whole roomful of them at once, and one of them will be his daughter's.

We are a people whose founder said *the face is the writing of God*, and every time the world has answered us, it has answered by removing faces.

The grave at Alinja became a place of pilgrimage. They went there in the month he died. They wore the white cloth that pilgrims wear to Mecca and they walked around his tomb seven times and then seven times again, and if you have been listening to anything I have said in this room you know why it was seven and then seven, and you know that they were not walking around a tomb.

They were reading him.

Seven for the lines his mother gave him. Seven for the lines his father gave him. Around and around a dead man in the snow in Nakhchivan, with the Kaaba behind them and forgotten — the black

cube at Mecca, the house every Muslim on earth turns to five times a day — because a house is only ever a picture of a face.

Here the recitation ends. Tea is brought. Tonight it was Sanam Sarmadi who poured, with her left hand, from the doorway, and did not sit down.

PART FIVE — THE LOWER RIGHT LASHES

I read her for the first time on a Thursday night in the fourth month, while she slept.

I want to describe this properly, because I have found that people assume it was furtive and quick, a man leaning over a bed in the dark, and it was not that. It was worse than that. It took two hours and I set it up like a job.

She slept on her left side, which put the right of her face upward, which was convenient, and I have thought about that word since. I moved the reading lamp off the desk in the back room and carried it through and set it on the floor on her side of the bed with the shade turned so that the light came up onto her at the angle we use — low, oblique, from below the plane of the face, because light from above fills the ground and light from below throws the lines and any reader who tells you otherwise is reading portraits and not people. I put a folded towel under the lamp so the base would not scrape.

I sat on the floor with my back against the wardrobe.

Then I did not do anything for perhaps twenty minutes, and I have no account of that twenty minutes. I was not deciding. The deciding had happened in the stationer's.

Then I read my wife.

* * *

The scalp line first, because you always start at the top of the page, because that is the discipline and the discipline is the only thing that keeps a reader from finding what he came to find.

It was intact. Temple to temple, full and level, no retreat. In a woman of forty-four that is a strong first line and it always had been. But the ground under the right temple had gone down, and a line does not have to move to change: if the surface beneath it drops, the line curves in space even though every hair is where it was. It had begun to bow. Not much. Less than the width of a fingernail.

A straight stroke that has taken a shallow curve at one end is a different letter than a straight stroke.

I did not write that down yet. I went to the brows.

The right brow had dropped — I have already told you it had dropped, I knew that in the doctor's office in the first four minutes — but under the lamp, from below, at two in the morning, what I saw was not a drop. It was a *tilt*. The inner end had stayed where it was, anchored beside the sword-cut. The outer end had gone down and, because the temple had hollowed, slightly back. So the brow was no longer a horizontal stroke with a rise in it. It was an oblique, running down and away from the line of settling.

An oblique running down and away from the centre.

I sat on the floor of my bedroom and my ears went hot, the way they do.

Because I knew what that was. Any child in this lineage knows what that is. It is the descender. It is the tail that hangs below the ruled line, the stroke that a scribe pulls down and out at the end of a word to say *this is finished, this closes here* — and there are seven letters in Persian that carry one and the doctrine reads all seven of them under the same head: **completion**.

Her right brow had stopped being a line and become an ending.

I read for another hour and forty minutes. Lashes, four sets, the two on the right now sitting at a changed angle over an eye that did not fully close and therefore showed more of itself, which alters the ground and therefore alters the contrast and therefore alters everything. The tuft, which she did not have. The nostrils, which she did not have. Seven lines and four of them altered and one of them altered into something that had a name.

And at four in the morning I sat there with my hands over my mouth, because the reading I had just taken off my wife's sleeping face was *better than any reading I had ever taken off her*.

I do not mean more pleasant. Do not misunderstand me, I am not going to tell you her disease was writing her a love letter.

I mean better as a *text*. Denser. More determined. The old reading — the one I had had of her since I was twenty-four years old, the one I had taken in a room with two families in it and a plate of sweets on the table — was clear, and it was fine, and it was, I understood on that floor, *bland*. Seven strong lines all agreeing with each other, all level, all saying more or less the same thing in the same tone. A fair copy of an unremarkable document. A face like good handwriting on a form.

And now four of the seven had gone off in different directions and started arguing, and one of them had a tail on it, and the whole page had acquired the quality that I had spent twenty-six years telling apprentices was the mark of an important text and which I could not, that night, remember ever having found in a living person.

It had become difficult.

* * *

She turned over at twenty past four and I picked the lamp up off the floor with both hands so that it would not scrape and carried it back to the desk in the dark, and I did not sleep, and at seven she came into the kitchen taping her eye shut with one hand and said, “You look terrible,” and I said the fog had kept me up, which is not even a lie a person can tell, and she took it and went to put the kettle on.

10

The notebook was A5, hard cover, black, ninety pages.

I want to describe what I actually did with it because I have heard the versions that circulate now and they are all more dramatic than the truth and the truth is worse.

I did not write it up like scripture. I did not use the formulas. There is a formula — there is a whole liturgical shape to a written reading, the position and the date and the light and the reader’s name and then the fourteen or the seven each on their own line with their value and their letter and then the sentence at the

bottom, and I have written perhaps four hundred of them in my life for the lineage's archive, in a hand I inherited from Ostad Rafi'i, who inherited it from his mother.

I wrote it up like a man writing about his wife.

4th month, 21st. 02:10-04:20. Lamp low from left, floor. She slept the whole time.

Scalp: intact, bowing at right temple. Perhaps 2mm of drop under it since the photograph at Nowruz. The line has not moved. The ground has moved.

Right brow: descender. It is a descender. I have looked at it for an hour and I cannot make it anything else.

And then, four lines further down, in the same hand, on the same page, and this is the sentence that eleven months later a woman of seventy-one read aloud, in a flat voice, in my own back room, to everyone I have:

I have never had this much from her.

That is what I wrote. Six words. I have never had this much from her.

Not *she has never given me this much*. Not *the text has never offered this much*. **I have never had this much from her** — a man's sentence, an appetite's sentence, and the woman it is about was asleep eight feet away with a piece of clear tape holding her eye shut.

* * *

I went back nine more times over the next six weeks.

It stopped being a Thursday thing. It became whatever night the light was right and she was under by eleven, and I got better at it, which is the part I would most like to leave out. I learned to fold a second towel under the lamp base. I learned that if I ran the tap in the bathroom first she would surface and turn and go deeper and then I had two hours instead of one. I learned to take the lamp back before I wrote anything, so that if she woke there was nothing in the room to explain.

I hid the notebook inside the dust jacket of the second volume of my father's commentary, on the high shelf, behind the door, which is exactly where a man in this city hides money and exactly where his wife looks for it.

And every one of those nine readings was better than the one before.

That is the part I need you to sit with, because everyone who hears this story wants there to have been a moment where I saw what I was doing and chose it anyway, a moment of clean transgression with a door in it.

There was no door. There was a page that got more interesting every week.

If the readings had been bad — if the illness had smeared her, blurred the lines, thickened the ground, made her hard to read the way age makes people hard to read — I would have stopped in the second week and grieved like anybody else, and this would be a short book about a man whose wife got sick.

Instead I was being handed, night after night, in my own bedroom, off the face of the person I loved most in the world, the finest text I had ever read.

And I did not tell her. And I did not tell the lineage. And on the ninth night, in the sixth week, with the lamp on the floor and the towel folded under it, I found that the outer third of her right brow was no longer there at all, and I put my hand out and did not quite touch her face, and I wrote in the notebook: *six*.

Not *she has lost her eyebrow*.

Six.

PART SIX — THE UPPER LEFT LASHES

11

Six.

There is no word in our books for six. There are words for the seven and words for the fourteen and words for the twenty-eight and words for the thirty-two, and there is a great deal of writing about what it means that these numbers are what they are, and about the seven verses of the *Fatiha*, and the seven cavities of the head — two eye sockets, two nostrils, two earholes, the mouth — and about the thirty-two teeth, which Fazlallah offered as the body's own signature on the alphabet.

There is nothing about six.

Six is not a diminished seven in our system. It is not seven-minus-one. Our numbers do not work by subtraction, they work by *completion*, and a set that is not complete is not a smaller set. It is a different kind of object entirely, and there is no name for it, and the reason there is no name for it is that until the winter I am describing, no one in six hundred years had needed one.

Everybody has seven. That is the whole point of the maternal lines. That is why they are the maternal lines. Every child born on the earth arrives with the scalp line and two brows and four sets of lashes, and this universality is not incidental to the doctrine, it is the doctrine — it is the proof that the alphabet is issued to all and withheld from none, that God does not write only on the beautiful or the rich or the male, that the poorest infant in the poorest house in this province is a complete document from the moment it opens its eyes.

Seven is the floor. Nobody has ever been under the floor.

My wife was under the floor.

* * *

I cried for the first time that night, on the floor of our bedroom, with my hand over my mouth so hard that I bruised my lip.

And here is my problem, and it is the problem I have not solved in the time since and will not solve in this book:

I do not know what I was crying about.

There is the obvious answer. My wife, forty-four years old, was being taken apart in front of me over months, without pain, without pause, and there was nothing at the end of it that anyone had been able to describe to me as a stopping place, and I loved her, and I had loved her since I was twenty-four, and a man is entitled to sit on the floor and cry about that.

And there is the other answer, which arrived at the same time and in the same body, and which I could not separate from the first one that night and cannot separate now: that I was holding the only text in the recorded history of my people that had gone under seven, and that it was the greatest thing I would ever read, and that it was still going, and that no reader in six hundred years had been given what I had been given.

Both of those were true at four in the morning.

I have talked to two people about this. One of them, who is dead now, told me that grief is not clean in anyone and that I was making a virtue of my own bookkeeping. The other one said nothing for a long time and then said, "Which one made you write it down?"

I wrote it down.

12

THE THIRD RECITATION

Delivered on the eighth night, at the house of Tuba Khanum. Fifteen adults, the room too small for it, people standing at the back. Word had begun to move.

* * *

After the head came off at Alinja, the doctrine did not die. It went sideways, which is what doctrines do.

Some of his followers decided he would come back. That is the ordinary thing, and it is a little sad, and it is not our line. Others decided something stranger and much more dangerous, which is *our* line, and which explains this room and everyone in it, and

which I want you to hear properly because people repeat it as though it were a joke about heretics.

They decided they were already in Paradise.

The reasoning is airtight if you accept the first step. If Fazlallah was the manifestation of the glory, and if to have seen him was to have had the vision of God that the rest of the faithful are promised only after death — then those who saw him have already received the reward. They are in the garden now, standing here, in these clothes.

And there are no duties in Paradise.

So: no prayer. No fast. No ritual washing. Nothing forbidden, nothing required, nothing unclean. One of our own texts puts it flatly — Paradise is knowledge and hellfire is ignorance, and a man who knows the thirty-two of his own being holds all things as permitted.

Some of them went further than that and said that a man who has the knowledge is entitled to take whatever comes within his reach, and to go and get what does not.

I am not going to soften this. This is in our books. This is what a portion of our people believed in Baghdad and Shirvan and Gilan [gee-LAN] and Khorasan, and it is one of the several reasons the world came for us with fire.

But I want the young ones in this room to understand what it left us with, because you are living inside the consequence of it and you do not know that you are.

We have no machinery for forbidding.

Look around this room. Count us. Three families. We have a reader, we have an elder, we have an archive in four houses and a rite in the month he died. We have no clergy. We have no court. We have never, in six centuries, tried anyone for anything, because the men who carried this doctrine out of the fifteenth century carried it out on the specific understanding that prohibition is a thing that belongs to the world outside the garden.

Every other faith on this earth, when one of its own does something monstrous, has a lever to pull.

We have a lever for one thing only, and it is not forbidding, and you will hear what it is on the last night.

* * *

Now: Aleppo.

His name was Nesimi [neh-see-MEE], and he was the best poet any of us have ever produced, and he met Fazlallah exactly once, shortly before the end. Once. That was enough to ruin a man for the rest of his life and Nesimi spent the rest of his walking through Anatolia putting the doctrine into Turkish verse so good that people who despised the doctrine copied out the poems anyway.

And into the poems he put a sentence that was not ours. He took it from Hallaj [hal-LAAJ], the great martyr of the Sufis, executed in Baghdad four hundred years before him for saying it in public.

Ana'l-Haqq [a-nal-HAQQ]. I am the Truth. Which is to say: I am God.

Our scholars have argued for centuries about whether they killed him for the letters or for that sentence. I think it was the sentence. I think the letters were an eccentricity and the sentence was a capital crime, and I think it hardly matters, because the two of them are the same claim wearing different clothes: if the divine writing is on your face, then the thing walking around inside the writing is going to say something like *ana'l-Haqq* eventually, and the world is going to answer.

They flayed him alive.

In Aleppo, in the first decade of the fifteenth century — the year is disputed among the historians and I have never understood why anyone thought the year was the interesting part.

I said to you on the sixth night that our founder's punishment took his face off his body. Hear what this one is.

This one takes the face off the face.

A flaying does not remove a man. It removes his *surface*. It removes the exact substance — skin, and what grows out of skin — on which every one of the fourteen lines is written. It leaves the man; for a while, it leaves the man very much there. And it takes the page.

There is a story that he went on reciting while it was done. I do not know whether it is true. I do not think it is true. I have sat with the dying for twenty-six years and I know what a body will and will not do.

But I understand exactly why we tell it, and so do you.

Because the whole of our doctrine is the claim that the writing is not the surface.

That the letters are not ink. That the face is not a picture of the scripture but the scripture itself, and therefore inexhaustible, and therefore not the kind of thing that can be taken off a man with a knife and held up.

And the only way to make that claim in front of a man being skinned in a public square in Aleppo is to say that he kept talking.

Here the recitation ends. Tonight the tea was late, because there were not enough glasses in the house, and Golnaz Ehsani went next door for more.

PART SEVEN — THE LOWER LEFT LASHES

Sanam found the notebook. Not Tuba Khanum.

I have let people believe otherwise for a long time, because Tuba Khanum let them, and because the version in which the elder discovers the reader's secret is a tidier story than the one in which a sick woman goes looking for money behind her husband's father's commentaries.

She was looking for money. We had begun to need it. The scans are not free and the drops are not free and I had not read a paid funeral in five weeks because I had stopped answering the phone.

She took it down and read nine entries and put it back and said nothing for four days.

Four days. She poured tea. She asked me about Golnaz's progress. She watched a programme about the fisheries. On the fourth night she sat down across from me at the kitchen table with the notebook in front of her and her hands flat on either side of it, and the light was bad, and I remember that the right side of her face was the side toward the window, so that the sword-cut had a shadow lying in it, and I remember noticing that, and I remember hating myself in a way I had not managed at any point in the previous four months.

"Read it to me," she said.

"Sanam—"

"You have read me nine times. Read it to me."

So I read my wife the transcript of her own face.

It took forty minutes. She stopped me twice. The first time was at *the line has not moved, the ground has moved*, and she said, "Say that again," and I said it again, and she nodded once and told me to go on. The second time was at *I have never had this much from her*, and she did not say anything at all, and I stopped by myself, and then after a while I kept going because she was waiting.

At the end she said: "Is it good?"

"What?"

"The reading. Not — is it kind. Is it *good*. As a piece of work. Would your teacher have said it was good."

I said: "It is the best thing I have ever done."

And my wife put her head back and laughed with half her mouth, and it was a real laugh, and it was the most frightening sound I have ever heard in that house.

"Twenty-four years," she said. "Twenty-four years of being a cereal box. And all I had to do was this."

* * *

Then she said the thing that I did not understand for another eleven months, and that I have decided to put down here exactly where it happened rather than where it becomes clear, because you should have the same chance I had and did not take.

She said: "Do you want to know what frightens me?"

"Yes."

"Not the illness." She turned the notebook around with one finger, so it faced me. "That it took this. That there was a version of my face that got your attention and I did not have it. That somebody could have *given* me this, at the start, and you would have looked at me like that for twenty-four years."

I said something. I said something reasonable and warm and wrong, about how she had always been legible to me, about how a fair copy is not a lesser copy.

She let me finish. She was always very good about letting me finish.

Then she said, "Take it to Tuba Khanum."

"No."

"Mansur. You are going to take it to her eventually, and you will do it in a way that makes you look better than you look tonight. Take it now. Tonight, while I have said yes."

"You are saying yes?"

"I am saying," said Sanam, "that if this is happening to me, I would like to have been the one who let it happen."

That is exactly what she said. I have never written it down until now.

She thought she was choosing. I let her think it, because it was easier for both of us, and because I wanted to go, and because a man who wants to go will accept any permission he is handed.

14

They ratified it on a Friday afternoon in the front room of Tuba Khanum's house, with the three families in it and nowhere left to sit.

I want to describe how ordinary it was.

There was no vote. We do not have votes. There was no formula; nobody knew a formula for this because there had never been an occasion for one. Tuba Khanum sat in the good chair with the notebook on her knee and read the nine entries aloud in a flat voice, the way she reads everything, and when she got to *I have never had this much from her* she did not pause and did not look up, and I have thought about that for a long time and I believe she was protecting me, and I believe she should not have.

Then she closed it and put her hand on the cover and said: "Well. It is a reading."

That was the whole thing. Four words.

An old woman in a chair in a provincial city saying *well, it is a reading*, and a room full of people understanding immediately and completely what had just been decided, and one man standing by the door with his coat still on, feeling something come up through the floor of his chest that he did not have a name for and that he would like to record here was not entirely horror.

Because I want to be very clear about what happened in that room, and about why it happened, and about how it could not have happened any other way.

They did not approve of me. Several of them did not, and two of them have not spoken to me since.

They *ratified* — which is a different act, and a colder one. Ratification is what you do when a thing has occurred and your system contains no instrument for un-occurring it.

Think about what they would have needed, to stop it.

They would have needed a rule that says a reader may not read a particular face. There is no such rule; the entire doctrine is that any face may be read by anyone with the discipline, because that universality is the thing that makes it revelation instead of privilege.

They would have needed a rule that says a text in motion is not scripture. There is no such rule, and worse, everything in our books runs the other way — the *Javdan-nama* is emphatic that the writing is living, that creation is continuous, that God did not write once and stop.

They would have needed a doctrine of the forbidden.

And we sold that, six hundred years ago, in Shirvan and Gilan and Baghdad, for the extraordinary and terrible freedom of believing ourselves already in the garden.

Tuba Khanum said, *well, it is a reading*, because within our doctrine that is a true and complete sentence and there is nothing further available to say. It was a reading. It had been taken by a qualified reader, in proper light, from a face that possessed lines. Whether the face belonged to his sleeping wife, whether he had wanted her to have it, whether the whole thing was the most sordid act any of us had ever committed — none of that is a category in our books. Our books contain the number of the lines and the values of the letters and the discipline of the light.

A doctrine that will not forbid anything cannot protect anyone.

That is the sentence. That is the thing I have to say in this book and I would rather say it here, at the halfway point, plainly, than dress it up later.

We spent six centuries congratulating ourselves that we had no clergy and no court and no inquisitor. We told each other that this

was our purity: that we were the only people who had ever taken the writing seriously enough to refuse to police it. Every one of the recitations you have heard so far is, in part, a story about how the people with courts and inquisitors came and burned us, and we recite them with the particular satisfaction of the persecuted, who always believe that being killed for a thing proves the thing.

It proves nothing at all.

And on that Friday, a roomful of people who had no lever to pull looked at a man who had done something to his wife in the dark, and reached for the only instrument our doctrine has ever contained.

They read it.

* * *

The visits began nine days later.

PART EIGHT — THE RIGHT CHEEK

the first paternal line, from Adam

Five.

The upper right lashes went over about three weeks, and they did not fall out. I want to be accurate because the difference matters to a reader and it mattered to me.

Hair that falls out leaves a bare line. The line is gone but the *place* of the line is still there, a strip of skin where something used to be, and a reader can work with that; we have a whole procedure for the burned and the bald and the ones who have had the drugs, and the short version of the procedure is that an erased line still tells you where it was erased from.

Hers did not fall out. The ground under them dropped, and the lid rolled slightly outward as it dropped, and the lashes went with it — turned, until they were no longer a stroke lying across the eye but a fringe pointing away from me. Still present. Still every hair. Not readable, from any angle, in any light, because a line that has turned edge-on to the reader is not a line, it is a row of points.

I spent four nights trying to get an angle on them and on the fifth I wrote *five* and closed the book.

* * *

The visits had been going eleven weeks by then.

Nine days after they ratified it, the first one came. After that I stopped being able to say when any of them came, because they arrived the way weather arrives.

They took their shoes off in the hall. They sat in the back room under the north window, with my wife's face at the right height and the right distance, for two hours at a stretch, and made their notes, and thanked her on the way out, and thanked *me*, and I have never in my life been thanked in that particular way.

By the fourth week there was a rota — a list, with days on it, saying who came when. I did not make it. Tuba Khanum says she did not make it, and I believe her, and that is the most disturbing sentence in this chapter. It simply came into existence, the way a path

appears across a field, because a great many people all wanted the same thing at the same rate and were too polite to jostle.

By the eighth week we had a chair in the back room that was not one of our chairs, brought by somebody, left behind, and then used, and then permanent.

They took their shoes off. They brought food. They were, without exception, kind to her, and several of them were kinder to her than I was in that period, and I know that because I watched them do it.

And every one of them, for two hours at a stretch, sat eight inches from my wife's face and did not see her.

That is not a figure of speech and I am not accusing them of coldness. It is a technical fact about the discipline. You cannot read a face and see a person at the same time. The whole training is a training in *not* seeing the person — in refusing the mouth's expression, refusing the eyes, refusing the small movements that a face makes to tell you how it feels about you, because all of that is weather and you are there for the geology. I taught this. I have said in that same room, to that same third family, the sentence: *if you can still tell whether she likes you, you are not reading yet.*

They came into my house and did to my wife, correctly and with great care, a thing whose first requirement is that she not be a person.

And she made them tea.

* * *

I asked her, once, in the tenth week, why she allowed it.

She was drying her hands. She took a long time about it.

"Because you have all decided that I am the most important thing that has happened to this family in six hundred years," she said, "and there is no version of me saying stop that does not end with you hating me. Not out loud. You would all be extremely gracious about it."

"That is not true."

"Mansur." She hung the cloth on the rail. "How many nights since Nowruz have you slept?"

I did not answer.

"You would forgive me," she said. "You would forgive me the way a man forgives a fire."

16

THE FOURTH RECITATION

Delivered on the tenth night. It had been moved out to the courtyard, under plastic sheeting, with the heaters, because the house would not hold the number who came. This had not been necessary in living memory.

* * *

Thirty-seven years after Alinja, in Isfahan, a man we know almost nothing about led the last rising.

They called him Haji Sorkh [haa-JEE SORKH] — the red pilgrim — and he was not from Isfahan [es-fa-HAAN]; he arrived from somewhere else and within a short time he had enough of the city's Hurufis behind him to attack the governor's household and kill two of the governor's sons.

It failed. They always failed. Read our history in one sitting and what you notice is not the persecution, it is the *incompetence* — a doctrine that produced the finest poets in three languages could not organise a stable rebellion in a hundred years, and I have come to think the two facts are the same fact. A people who believe that the divine is already complete on every face have no reason to go anywhere or build anything. What would you build? The building would be less than the doorman's forehead.

They took Haji Sorkh and they skinned him alive.

Second time.

I said at Aleppo that the punishment takes the face off the face. Here it is again, thirty years later, a different city, a different court, a different crime — a rebellion this time, an ordinary political crime

with ordinary political rage behind it — and they reach for the same knife.

Nobody was making a point.

That is what I want the young ones to understand and it is the hardest thing in this recitation to say without sounding as though I am claiming a pattern. There is no conspiracy in it. Flaying was a real punishment in the fifteenth century and it was used on people who had never heard of the letters. If I told you the burnings and the beheadings of that century you would find our people scattered thinly among thousands of others, punished in all the ordinary ways for all the ordinary reasons.

But we do not recite the century. We recite ourselves.

And when a people recites only itself, over six hundred years, on ten nights a year, in courtyards, to children — a shape emerges out of the coincidences, and the shape is true in the only way that matters, which is that it is now what we are made of.

Ours is this. Every time the world has come for us, it has come for the surface.

The head off the body. The skin off the man. The skin off the man again.

And in ten nights' time you will hear how it ended, and you will hear that the last time, they did not take anyone's face at all. They took the room. They took five hundred of them at once and there was nothing left to read, and one of the five hundred was the woman who had copied out the book with her own hand, which is the only reason any of us can say any of this to you tonight.

* * *

I have been asked, by people who are not of us, whether we are frightened.

Whether living inside a story like this — a story whose every chapter ends with a face being removed — does something to a person over a lifetime.

The honest answer is no, and the honest answer is a confession.

We are not frightened, because it is *finished*. Nobody is coming. There has not been a fatwa against this doctrine in four hundred years for the excellent reason that nobody outside these three families believes it exists. We are not persecuted. We are not hidden. We are a small number of people in a provincial city who file our taxes and send our children to school and read faces, and the last person to die for this died in a century that had no rifles in it.

We recite the flayings the way a family recites a bankruptcy two generations back. With feeling. With a certain pride. From complete safety.

And that is why, when something finally did come for one of our faces — quietly, from inside, over months, in a bedroom — nobody in this courtyard recognised it.

We had six hundred years of practice at the wrong danger.

Here the recitation ends. The heaters were turned down. It rained on the plastic for the whole of the tea.

PART NINE — THE LEFT CHEEK

By midsummer the house was not a house.

I do not mean that in the way people mean it. The rooms were the same. Nobody had moved anything except the chair. What had changed was that every object in it had acquired a second function, the way objects do in a shop, so that the north window was no longer a window but *the light*, and the kitchen table was no longer where we ate but where the transcripts were collated on Fridays, and the corridor was where you waited.

There was a folder on the shelf by the door with the rota in it.

There was a plastic box for the shoes.

And there was a system for the photographs, which had begun with one camera on a kitchen chair and had become, by midsummer, a tripod and a strip of white tape on the floor to stand it on. The whole worth of a run of photographs is that nothing moves between them except the face. Shift the camera half an inch and you cannot tell afterwards whether the face changed or the room did.

They photographed her every eleven days. It had to be eleven; I do not remember who decided eleven or why, and by the time I thought to ask, eleven had been the interval for months and asking would have seemed like an attack.

She sat on a stool. She looked at a mark on the wall. She held still for the count of five, twice, and then she got up and went to put the kettle on, and behind her the sequence went into the folder and the folder went into the archive and the archive is in four houses in this province and will outlast every person named in this book.

* * *

I want to put down here what I understood at the time, because it was not nothing, and because I have been given more credit for blindness than I deserve.

I understood that my wife had become an object of study. I understood that this had happened because of a notebook I hid behind my father's commentaries. I understood that the kindness of

the visitors — and it was real kindness, they were not monsters, they brought food and asked after her sister and took their shoes off — was the specific kindness that people extend to something valuable, and that the two are almost impossible to tell apart from the inside, and completely impossible to tell apart from where she was sitting.

What I did not understand was that there was a version of this that was worse than exploitation.

Exploitation I could have got my hands around. Exploitation has somebody behind it. If they had been using my wife, I could have stood up in that courtyard and said so, and there would have been a fight, and fights end.

Nobody was using her.

Every single one of them believed — correctly, according to everything our doctrine has ever said — that they were doing the highest thing anyone of our tradition can do: sitting with a revelation while it is being given. They were not taking from her. They were *witnessing*. And the reason they came on Tuesdays and Thursdays with food and left their shoes in a plastic box was that they thought they were the luckiest people alive.

You cannot fight that. You cannot even name it without sounding like a man who wants his wife to himself.

18

She stopped me in the corridor on a Thursday in the ninth month, after the last of them had gone, with the light off, and said:

“I want to tell you what is actually happening.”

I said all right.

“Not to my face. To me.”

We sat in the kitchen. She did not put the light on. I have thought a great deal about the fact that she did not put the light on, and I have concluded that it was not shame, it was that she had spent nine months being lit correctly and she wanted one conversation in the dark.

"You have all written down," she said, "what my face says. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Read me the last one."

"Sanam—"

"From memory. You know it from memory."

I did know it from memory. I said: "The scalp line has taken a bow at the right temple and no longer runs true. The right brow is a descender. The upper right lashes have turned edge-on and cannot be read. The lower right are shortening. What remains legible is four lines and a fragment, and the fragment is arguing with the four."

"Arguing," she said.

"That is the word we use when—"

"I know the word you use. I have been in this house for twenty-four years." She put both hands flat on the table. "Now listen to me, because this is the part that nobody has written down and nobody is going to.

"I cannot close my right eye. I tape it shut to sleep and in the morning the tape takes skin off and I have got used to that. I cannot feel the right side of my top lip and I have not been able to since the spring, so when I drink I have to watch myself in the window of the microwave to know whether I am spilling. Food goes into the pocket on that side and stays there and I have to hook it out with a finger, and I do that in the bathroom with the door locked, four or five times a day, and I have never once done it in front of you.

"Chewing is on one side. My jaw aches all the time on the good side from doing all of it. I bite the inside of my cheek because I cannot feel where it is, so there is a place in there that never gets a chance to heal and it has been there since Ramadan.

"I have stopped going to my sister's because her children stare, and they are not being cruel, they are four and six.

"And two weeks ago in the bazaar a woman I have known since school looked straight at me and did not know me. She looked at

me and *sorted* me — you know how it goes, that fast little movement, into the pile of people you do not know — and she smiled the way you smile at a stranger who is standing too close, and she moved on.

“That is what is happening. That is the whole event, from the inside. It is spilling water and hooking food out of a pocket and a woman not knowing me in the bazaar.”

She stopped. Then she said:

“Not one word of that is in the archive.”

* * *

I said — and I would give a great deal to be able to write down something else here — I said that it was in the archive, that the fourth reading records an eyelid that will not shut and the seventh notes a top lip gone slack, that it was all there.

She sat in the dark and let me say it.

Then she said: “You have recorded that my lip does not work. You have not recorded that I hide in the bathroom.”

“That is not—” I stopped.

“Say it.”

“That is not what the discipline is for.”

“No,” she said. “It is not. Thank you.”

She got up and filled the kettle at the tap by feel, in the dark, and stood with her back to me.

“I am not asking you to stop. I have thought about it for weeks and I am not asking that; you would stop and it would be worse, you would sit in this house with all that not-doing in you and I would have to watch it. I am asking for one thing.

“When I die, and you read me — and it will be you, do not let them give it to anyone else, I have told Tuba Khanum and she has agreed — when you read me, at the funeral, in front of everyone.

“Say one thing that is not on my face.”

I said: "What thing?"

"You have twenty-four years," said my wife. "Find one."

PART TEN — THE RIGHT MOUSTACHE

The lower right lashes went in the eleventh month and the count came to four, and the lineage split.

I had not expected that. I had expected grief, or a kind of solemnity, or at worst the sour undertone that had been in two of the families since the ratification. What I got was six weeks of the most vicious scholarly argument I have witnessed in my life, conducted entirely in polite voices, in the courtyard and on the telephone and in a series of letters written by people who lived four streets apart.

The question was the scalp line.

By then the ground under her right temple had gone far enough that the hairline on that side did not merely bow — it broke. There was a section, perhaps two fingers wide, where the hair had gone down with the ground beneath it, so that the line ran from the left temple, across the crown, and then stopped, and then resumed for a short distance at the right temple and ended.

A line with a gap in it.

And the whole lineage discovered, in a single week, that we had no ruling on a broken line.

I will give you both sides, because I have to, because I argued one of them and I no longer know if I believed it.

The first position. A line is a line by virtue of being one continuous stroke. Break it and you do not have a line with a defect; you have two short lines, neither of which is any of the seven, because the seven are named and enumerated and there is no eighth. Therefore the scalp line is gone. Therefore the count is *three*.

The second position. The seven are not seven strokes. They are seven *places* — seven regions of the face at which the divine writing is issued. Interruption within a place is a feature of the writing, not a deletion of it; every old book in the world has damage in it and nobody says a torn page has stopped being scripture. Therefore the scalp line is present, and altered, and the count is *four*.

They argued that for six weeks.

A doctrine six hundred years old, three surviving families, and every scholar the tradition had left in the world — and all of it was thrown at the question of whether a woman's hairline still counted.

Nobody asked her.

I want that on the page by itself.

Nobody asked her.

* * *

It settled at four, in the end, and it settled the way these things always settle, which is that Tuba Khanum stopped talking about it and everyone noticed that she had stopped.

I wrote *four* in the notebook on a Tuesday in the twelfth month.

And I sat there with the pen and I did not put it down for a long time, because of what four is.

Four is not one of our numbers either. Seven, fourteen, twenty-eight, thirty-two — those are our numbers, those are the ones the books are about. There is no chapter on four.

But there is a four.

There are four letters in the Persian alphabet that Arabic does not have. *Pe* [PEH]. *Che* [CHEH]. *Zhe* [ZHEH]. *Gaf* [GAAF]. They are the sounds in *pedar*, father; in *chesm*, eye; in the middle of *muzhde*, good news; in *gol*, flower — four sounds a Persian mouth makes and an Arab mouth does not.

Any scholar in the world will tell you where they came from. Scribes made them. They took Arabic letters that already existed and added dots to them, centuries after the revelation had closed, because they needed to write their own language down. Four letters that arrived late, by human hand, in a workshop.

And Fazlallah, in the book that this entire lineage has organised itself around for six hundred years, insisted that those four were pre-eternal. That they were among the names taught to Adam before time. That the men who improvised them were not inventing

but remembering, and that there is no test anywhere in creation that can tell a letter God wrote from a letter a man added in good faith.

Four.

I looked at that number on the page in my own handwriting for I do not know how long, and I did not write anything under it, and I closed the book.

I want to be honest about what that was. It was not a revelation. I did not sit up. It was the sensation you get when two things in a room turn out to be the same colour and you cannot stop seeing it, and there is no meaning in it, and you know there is no meaning in it, and you look at it anyway.

Two months later a nineteen-year-old girl told me where she got her nose, and the colour stopped being a coincidence.

20

THE FIFTH RECITATION

Delivered on the twelfth night, in the courtyard, without the sheeting, because it was dry. Sanam Sarmadi attended, and sat, and was moved three separate times into the seat with the best light on her, by three different people, none of whom had planned it. She remarked on this afterwards to me and to nobody else.

* * *

Tabriz [tab-REEZ]. Forty-seven years after Alinja.

This is the last one. After tonight there are no more killings to recite, and the reason is not that they stopped disliking us. It is that after Tabriz there was nobody left in Persia to kill.

The community there was large and it was confident and it had, for the first and only time in our history, something like a patron: the ruler of the city wrote poetry, and in his poetry — you can still read it — he praised Fazlallah by name, and he wrote that the seven verses of the opening chapter of the Qur'an are reflected in the face of the beloved.

Hold on to that line. I am going to come back to it and it is going to cost you something.

The community was led, in part, by a woman. She was Fazlallah's own daughter. Her name was Kalimat-Allah al-'Ulya [ka-lee-MAT ol-LAAH al-OOL-yaa] — the Word of God, the Exalted — which tells you everything about the family she was born into, and she had been widowed by a butcher who died in a fit of ecstasy in the Naubar [now-BAR] quarter of that city, and she had spent her life doing the thing that keeps doctrines alive, which is not preaching.

Copying.

The scholars of Tabriz demanded the ruler destroy us. He did not want to. He temporised for years. And then a dervish came to the leading scholar of the city and said that the Prophet had appeared to him in a dream and instructed that the Hurufis be annihilated.

A dream.

Our founder was a dream-interpreter before he was anything else. People brought him their dreams the way you bring a doctor a cough. That is how he made his living in his twenties, in the city where you are sitting.

And it was a dream that killed us.

The scholar issued the ruling. The ruler stood out of the way. And they burned around five hundred people in Tabriz, and one of them was the daughter, and there is no grave.

* * *

Now. Two things, and then we will have the tea.

The first. I told you at Aleppo and at Isfahan that when the world comes for us it comes for the surface. That is the shape of our story. Here it does not hold. Here they did not take faces. They took a room and everything in it, and there was no page left, no skin, nothing to hold up in a square.

That is worse and you know it is worse, and I have never met a person of this lineage who could say exactly why. I think it is this: a flaying leaves a text. There is a thing on the ground that was the

writing. What happened in Tabriz left no object at all. It is the only event in six hundred years of our history that produced nothing to read.

The second, and this is why we recite this one last.

Everything we possess — every book in the four houses, every commentary, the summary in Persian, the pages in the old dialect that none of us can properly read, every last thing that lets me stand in a courtyard and tell you what a hairline means — exists because that woman sat down and copied out her father's book by hand.

She made copies. The copies went out. The copies went west, into Anatolia, into the Balkans, into the lodges of dervishes who were not us and did not care what we believed and kept our books for five hundred years anyway, on shelves, in Albania, for reasons nobody has satisfactorily explained.

She burned. Her copies did not.

That is the doctrine's one hard-won piece of practical wisdom and I want the young ones to have it plainly:

We do not survive in bodies. We survive in copies.

Here the recitation ends. This is the last of the killings. On the fourteenth night we recite the crossing, and the six hundred years of nothing, and then we recite ourselves, and then the month is over.

PART ELEVEN — THE LEFT MOUSTACHE

Golnaz told me in the back room, on a Tuesday, with the light going, and she did it in the flat voice people use when they have rehearsed a thing in the car.

"I need to say something and I need you to not talk until I finish."

"All right."

"When I was seventeen I had my nose done."

I did not say anything, because she had asked me not to, and because there was nothing in me that wanted to.

"And my brows. Not plucked — everyone does plucked. Threaded and then the ends taken up. And the hairline, a little, at the temples, because I have my father's temples." She had her hands under her thighs, palms down, sitting on them, which is what she did when she was frightened, and which I had noticed in her first week and had never mentioned to her. "I begged my mother for a year. She said no for a year. Then she said yes and paid for it and told my father it was for my sinuses."

"Golnaz—"

"You said you would not talk."

"You have finished."

"I have not finished." She took her hands out from under her legs and put them on the table. "I have been sitting in this room for fourteen months learning that my face is the writing of God. And I have known the whole time that a woman in a room off the ring road took a knife to it when I was seventeen because I would not stop crying about it."

The light went while she was saying that. It goes fast here in the autumn; there is a particular ten minutes when the north window stops being useful and I have spent my life arranging myself around those ten minutes, and I did not get up to turn the lamp on, because getting up would have been a way of leaving.

We sat in the dark.

"Say something," she said.

"I do not have anything."

"You have twenty-six years."

"I have twenty-six years of a doctrine that does not have a sentence for you." I heard my own voice do something I did not like. "Do you want the school answer or do you want what I actually think?"

"The school answer first."

* * *

So I gave her the school answer, and I will give it to you, because it is coherent and it is old and until that autumn I believed it.

To alter a face is not vandalism. It is **forgery**.

That is the whole of it, and everything else is commentary. We do not say that a surgeon has damaged the writing, because damage is a category we are comfortable with — every face is damaged, by weather and work and years, and a damaged manuscript is still the manuscript. Scars are legible. Burns are legible. A man who has been kicked by a horse at nine years old has a face that a good reader can read *around*, and the reading will include the horse, because the horse happened to him and God did not stop writing when the horse arrived.

Forgery is different in kind. Forgery is when a hand that is not the author's makes marks that are impossible to tell apart from the author's, *with intent that they be read as the author's*.

The forged face does not say nothing. That is what people always assume and it is exactly wrong. The forged face says something perfectly clear, in good letters, in a confident hand — and what it says did not come from God, and it will be read as though it did, by a reader who has no way of knowing, in front of a family who will believe him.

That is why it is the great crime in our books and the only thing approaching one. Not because it insults the writing. Because it **corrupts the reading**.

And I told her — and this is the part I would take back — that it was not her sin. That she was seventeen. That the sin belongs to the hand that holds the blade and not to the face that was on the table.

She listened to all of it in the dark.

Then she said: “And what do you actually think?”

“I think it does not matter whose sin it is,” I said. “I think I have read you eleven times and written six of them into the archive and I do not know which parts of you I was reading.”

“Yes,” said Golnaz. “That is what I think too.”

* * *

Then, after a while, in a different voice, the voice of a girl and not of a student:

“Everyone has had it done.”

“Not everyone.”

“Ostad. Everyone.” She said it patiently, the way you correct someone about a thing they have decided not to look at. “In my year at school, out of thirty-one girls, I know of nineteen. Two hundred thousand a year in this country. There are streets in Tehran where you cannot buy a sandwich but you can get a nose. My cousin had hers done twice because the first one *settled wrong*.”

“That is Tehran.”

“It is Gorgan. It is this street.” She leaned forward. “Ostad, when you read a face in this city, and the face is under fifty, and it is a woman — what odds are you giving yourself?”

I did not answer her.

“You have never asked,” she said. “Not once, in any reading, in your whole life, have you asked a woman whether her face is hers.”

“It would be an obscene question.”

“It would be the first question you would have to ask to do the job properly,” said Golnaz Ehsani, nineteen years old, sitting in my dead teacher’s chair in the dark, “and you have not asked it

because you already knew what the answer was going to be, and you would rather have the readings.”

22

The place is called the Darmangah-e Nur [dar-maan-GAAH-eh NOOR]. The Light Clinic. It is on the ring road between a tyre place and a shuttered bank, and it has been there since before I was married, and I had driven past it perhaps four thousand times.

That is not a figure of speech. I did the arithmetic afterwards, sitting in the car. Twice a week for thirty years to get to the Kordkuy road. Four thousand times, give or take.

I went on a Thursday morning and sat in the car park for forty minutes before I went in.

You know what the waiting room looks like. Everybody in this country knows what it looks like. Eleven women and two men, and of those, five with the tape across the bridge and the packing still in, and one of the men with it too, and the tape is white and it is meant to be discreet and it is the single least discreet object in the Islamic Republic, because everyone knows, and being known is at least half of what it is for. Girls wear it to weddings. Girls wear it who have not had the operation.

A television on the wall with the sound off. Plastic chairs in rows. A woman at the desk with a book.

And on the wall behind her, framed, in a good hand, the thing that made me put my hand on the back of a chair:

And He taught Adam the names, all of them.

That is the verse. It is a common enough verse; it is on a thousand walls. It is the verse about God teaching Adam the names of all things, and any Muslim in the world can have it on the wall of any business and it means nothing more than a pious decoration.

Except that in our books, and only in our books, that verse has one meaning and one only, and it has had that meaning since a merchant's son in this city wrote it down six hundred years ago: **the names taught to Adam were the thirty-two letters.** Not the

names of animals. Not vocabulary. The alphabet, entire, handed over in advance of everything, in the first minute of the human world.

That verse, on that wall, in that waiting room, is a Hurufi sentence.

There is no possible way for it to be there by accident, and there is every possible way for it to be there by accident, and I stood in the door of a cosmetic surgery on the ring road of a provincial city and understood that I was not going to be able to tell the difference — not that day, not with what I had, maybe not ever — and that this had been the condition of my entire life and I had simply never before been in a room where it cost anything.

The woman at the desk asked if I had an appointment.

I said I wanted to see the doctor.

She asked what it was regarding, in the voice they use, the one that means *consultation or complaint*, and I heard myself say:

“Tell her Hormoz Rafi’i’s student is here.”

Hormoz [hor-MOZ] was my teacher’s first name. In twenty-six years I had used it out loud perhaps four times, because you do not call your *ostad* by his name, alive or dead.

She put her pen down.

She did not ask me who Hormoz Rafi’i was. She did not ask me my name. She went through the door behind the desk, and she was gone four minutes, and when she came back she held the door open and said, “She will see you now,” and thirteen people in plastic chairs watched me go in ahead of all of them.

PART TWELVE — THE RIGHT NOSTRIL

She was fifty-three and she had her father's hands.

That is the first thing I saw and it took the legs out from under me before either of us had spoken, because I had watched those hands for twenty-six years — the long flat thumb, the way the fingers sit slightly apart at rest instead of closing — and I had last seen them in a box eleven years ago being carried out of a house I have keys to.

"Sit down," she said. "You look like you are going to go over."

The room was a consulting room. A desk, two chairs, a lightbox on the wall with nothing on it, a sink. On the desk a photograph of two young men in a garden who I took to be her sons, and a paperweight, and a cup of tea that had gone cold enough to have a skin on it.

"You knew my father," she said.

"He taught me."

"Yes." She looked at me the way you look at a document. "You are the reader. You are Sanam's husband."

I had not told the woman at the desk my name.

* * *

I want to slow down here, because everything I had rehearsed in the car park for forty minutes went out of me in that first minute, and what happened instead was a conversation of about ninety minutes that I have gone over so many times since that I can no longer be certain which parts are memory and which are the smoothed thing you get from handling.

I am going to set it down as straight as I can.

"You have the verse on the wall," I said.

"Yes."

"And He taught Adam the names, all of them."

"Yes."

"Do you know what that verse means?"

"I know what it means to you," said Parvaneh Rafi'i [par-vaa-NEH ra-fee-EE]. "It means the names were the thirty-two letters. It means the whole alphabet was handed over in the first minute of the world."

"Anyone can have that verse on a wall."

"Anyone can." She turned the cold tea a half circle on the desk without picking it up. "It has been on that wall since 1961. My grandfather put it there. Are you going to ask me the question, or are we going to do this for an hour?"

So I asked her the question.

"How long has this clinic belonged to the lineage?"

And Parvaneh Rafi'i said: "Since my great-grandmother. I am the fourth."

24

What she told me, that morning, in the consulting room, with the door shut.

I am setting this down as a recitation because that is what it was. She spoke without stopping for a long time, in the cadence I have heard in a courtyard every year of my life, and when she had finished she drank the cold tea, which I found more frightening than anything she had said.

* * *

You have been reciting our history for six hundred years, she said, and you stop it in 1441.

Tabriz. The five hundred burned. The daughter with no grave. Then the crossing — the books going west into Anatolia, into the Balkans, into the dervish lodges in Albania where men who did not believe a word of it kept our papers on a shelf for five centuries because they had been asked to.

And then you say: *six hundred years of nothing.*

You say it every year. You said it last month; my cousin was there and told me. Six hundred years of nothing, and then here we are, three families in a provincial city.

It was not nothing. You simply were not told.

* * *

Think about what actually happened to us after Tabriz. Not the books. The *people*.

There were survivors in this province. Not many; enough. And they had learned in the hardest way available that a doctrine which announces itself gets its adherents burned in a square, and so they did what every hunted people does, and they went quiet, and they became fathers and grandmothers and men who sold cloth.

And they carried a doctrine which says — say it with me, you have said it all your life — that the human face is the writing of God.

Now. You are a hunted family holding that belief. You are living among people who would kill you for it. What is the one profession, of all the professions available in this world, that would let you spend your entire working life with your hands on the writing?

You have been reading faces. We have been *keeping* them.

Barbers, first. That is not a joke and I will not have you smile at it. My great-great-grandfather's father was a barber in the old bazaar and a barber in this country did everything — he shaved you, he took your teeth out, he set your arm, he lanced what needed lancing, and he did all of it on and around the face and nobody thought about it twice. Four generations of our men had the razor on the seven lines of half this city and no one ever asked them why they were so careful.

Then a surgeon, when there started to be surgeons. My great-grandmother. Trained in Tehran, came back here, opened two rooms above a shop in 1934 and did cleft lips and burns and the noses of men who had been hit in the face, and she was the only woman doing it in this province and they let her because there is work that men will not do on other men's wives.

Then my grandfather. Then my father — yes, your *ostad*, yes, the man who taught you, he was in this building three days a week for thirty years and you never once asked what he did on the days he was not teaching you, because a boy does not ask and a man does not think to start.

Then me.

* * *

And here is the part you came for, so sit still.

We do not consider what we do a violation of the writing.

We consider it **copying**.

You recite it yourself. Every year, on the twelfth night, you stand in that courtyard and you tell the children the one useful thing this doctrine has ever learned: *we do not survive in bodies, we survive in copies*. His daughter sat down and copied out her father's book with her own hand and then she burned and the copies did not.

You say that. You have never once asked what it obliges you to do.

She copied the Book of Eternity. Very well. What is the other scripture? What did your entire life's work consist of? The face is not *like* the writing, you say, it *is* the writing — you have said that in my father's house at my father's table, he told me, he thought it was the best thing you did.

Then every face in this city is a manuscript, and every one of them is unique, and every single one of them is going to die.

Nobody is copying them.

Six hundred years and it never occurred to any of you. You sit with the dying and you read them out loud, once, into a room, and then the page goes into the ground and the reading goes into a folder in somebody's house, and you call that preservation. It is not preservation. It is a description of a book that no longer exists. It is what a man writes on the outside of a burned crate.

We copy.

When a girl comes in here at seventeen and asks for a nose, she does not know what she is asking for and I do not tell her, and I never will, and you may despise me for it. She goes out with a face that reads *cleanly*. Her lines separate from the ground. Her brow stops arguing with her lash. She becomes, at seventeen, easy to read — and she will be read, at her funeral, by you or by whoever comes after you, and the reading will be *better* because of what happened in this room.

I have made four thousand faces legible in this province.

You have read perhaps four hundred.

Which of us has served the writing?

* * *

I said — and it took me a long time to get it out — “You have forged four thousand faces.”

And she said the thing that I have not been able to put down for a year.

“Ostad Sarmadi. Tell me the test.”

“What?”

“Tell me the test that distinguishes a forged line from a true one.” She had her father’s hands flat on the desk. “You are the finest reader this lineage has produced in a hundred years and you have been in this city for forty-eight of them. I have been cutting faces four streets from your house for thirty years and my father did it for thirty before me and his father before him. You have read our work. You have read hundreds of pieces of our work, at funerals, out loud, in front of families, and you have called it the writing of God.

“Not once. Not one time in your entire life have you looked at a face we made and said: *this is false*.

“So tell me the test. And if you cannot tell me the test, do not stand in my room and say the word forgery, because forgery is a claim about a difference, and you do not have one.”

PART THIRTEEN — THE LEFT NOSTRIL

She showed me the books because I asked, and she showed me the books because she wanted to, and I have stopped trying to work out which of those was the larger part.

Not a computer. There is a computer, and there are the records the state requires, and those are downstairs and they are exactly what you would expect. What she took me up to was a room on the second floor with a window onto the car park, and shelving on three walls, and on the shelving the ledgers.

Ninety-one of them. Cloth spines, the older ones in a size they do not make any more.

"Nineteen twenty-eight to now," she said. "The barbers did not keep any. Or they did and we lost them. My great-grandmother started this the year she opened."

I took one off the shelf at random, the way you do, and it fell open the way old books do, and it was a page of a woman's face in 1954.

* * *

Here is what a page looks like, because I have not been able to stop describing it to people.

At the top, the date and a number. No name — I will come to the names.

Then a drawing of a face. Front, and both three-quarters. Not a good drawing; a working drawing, done fast, the outline barely there, because the outline is not the point. What is on the drawing is the seven, marked in — the scalp line traced, the two brows traced, the four lash lines traced, each one with a small measurement beside it in a hand I could read because it is the hand my teacher taught me to write in.

Then, underneath, a second drawing of the same face.

The proposed one.

The same seven lines, redrawn. And beside each of them, in the same hand, what it would then say. The letter. The value. The little marginal note about how it would sit against the ones around it.

They are readings. That is what stopped me on the stairs and made her put her hand on my arm.

Every page in that room is a *reading* — taken to the standard I was trained to, in the format my teacher taught me, with the light noted at the top of the page — of a face that did not exist yet.

They read the woman. Then they read the woman she would become. Then they cut, until the second reading was true.

* * *

"There are no names," I said.

"There are names." She took the book out of my hands and closed it and put it back in its place on the shelf, and she was careful about it, and that carefulness is the thing I think about most. "The names are in the index. The index is downstairs and it is mine and you are not going to see it."

"Parvaneh—"

"Four thousand women in this province," she said, "who do not know. Whose husbands do not know. Whose daughters do not know. You want the index so that you can look up one name, and I understand exactly which name, and I am telling you that the index does not open for one name. It opens for all of them or none."

"Then open it for one."

"No."

"She is my wife."

"She is four thousand people's wife," said Parvaneh Rafi'i.

* * *

I sat in the car in the car park for a long time.

I want to record what I actually thought about, because it was not the thing you would expect. I did not think about whether Sanam

was in the index. I already knew Sanam was in the index; I had known it since the word *threaded* came out of a nineteen-year-old's mouth in my back room with the light going, and everything since then had been a man walking towards a fact he had already accepted in order to be able to say that he had checked.

What I thought about in the car was my own hand.

Because the drawings are in Ostad Rafi'i's hand. Not all of them — the older ones are his father's and his grandmother's, and there are perhaps fifteen years of them that are Parvaneh's, and hers is different, faster, more of a doctor's. But the middle of that room, three decades of it, is my teacher's handwriting.

And my handwriting is my teacher's handwriting.

He taught it to me the way you teach a child to hold a spoon, over years, correcting the angle of the pen with his thumb, and every reading I have ever entered into the lineage's archive is in that hand, and every proposed face in that room upstairs is in that hand, and if you took a page of mine and a page of his and put them side by side on a table, a stranger could not tell you which of us had served the writing and which of us had drawn a woman who did not exist yet.

That is not a metaphor about influence. I mean it literally. I mean that the archive of my religion and the order book of a cosmetic surgery are written in the same hand, and it is mine.

26

Sanam told me herself. I did not have to find it.

That is the part nobody believes when I say it, and I have stopped trying to make them believe it, because the version where a man uncovers his wife's secret is a story and the version where his wife puts it in front of him on a Thursday night is not a story, it is a marriage.

I had been home four hours. I had not said where I had been. She let me not say it through the meal and through the news and through the business of the tablets, which by then took eleven minutes and two glasses of water, and then she sat down opposite

me at the kitchen table and put her hands flat on it, which was the thing she did before difficult sentences and had been for twenty-four years.

"You went to the Light Clinic," she said.

"Who told you?"

"Nobody told me. You have been to Kordkuy and back four hundred times and you have never once come home smelling of that soap." She let that sit. "Ask me."

"Ask you what."

"Mansur. Ask me."

I could not do it. I want that on the page. I sat in my own kitchen with my mouth open and could not put the question into it, and my wife watched me fail to and then took it off me, the way she had been taking things off me since we were young.

"I was nineteen," she said. "It was my mother's idea and I did not fight her about it, so it was also mine. My nose, here—" she put a finger on the bridge, on the good side, and ran it down "—and the brows, both, taken up at the ends, and the hairline lifted at the temples because I had my father's temples and I hated them.

"It was the summer before I met you. It was four months before. I healed for six weeks with tape on my face in my mother's house and then in the autumn two families sat down in a front room with a plate of sweets on the table and a young man read me and said I was a clean copy."

* * *

I said: "You knew what I was."

"Everyone knew what your family was. It is a small city."

"You knew what I would do for a living. You knew I would read faces. And you sat in that room and let me read—"

"Say the rest of it," said Sanam.

"—a face that had been made four months earlier."

"Yes."

"Why?"

And my wife said: "Because I was nineteen and a man who was going to be somebody looked at my face for two minutes and said it was clear. Do you know what that is, at nineteen? I did not think I was deceiving a priest. I thought I was pretty and it had worked."

* * *

We sat there.

The tap was going somewhere in the pipes the way it does in that house.

"When did you understand?" I said.

"That it mattered? Properly?" She thought about it. She was always honest about the dates. "Eight years in. There was a funeral in Aliabad and you read an old woman and afterwards in the car you said something about how you could always tell a face that had been *helped* — you used that word, *helped* — and how the letters go flat, how there is a deadness in them.

"And I sat in the passenger seat and I thought: he has read me every day for eight years.

"And then I thought: *he cannot tell.*"

She said that last part without any triumph in it at all. That is what I cannot get past. There was no triumph in it. She had been carrying the single fact that would have taken my life's work apart, and she had carried it for sixteen more years, and what was in her voice when she finally put it down was tiredness.

"Why did you never say?"

"Mansur." She looked at me out of the face she had left. "What would you have done with it?"

* * *

I did not sleep. I went into the back room and put the lamp on and sat with my father's commentaries and did not open any of them.

Here is what I did instead, and it is the worst hour of the fourteen months.

I went through the readings.

Not hers. *All* of them. Twenty-six years, four hundred and eleven readings in the archive in my hand, and I sat in that room from midnight until the call to prayer and went through them in my head — every woman under fifty I had ever read, every clean copy, every face that had made me think *this one is a pleasure*, every time I had stood in a front room and told a family what God had written on their mother.

I could not clear a single one.

Not one. There is no reading in twenty-six years that I could pick up and say: this one, at least, this one was untouched.

And at some point in that hour it turned over in me, the way a thing does at four in the morning, and I stopped asking how many of them had been to a clinic and started asking the other question, which is the one I have not been able to put down since:

Would it have mattered?

Because I read those faces correctly. I read them by the discipline, in proper light, at the proper distance, and the sentences I said in those front rooms were true sentences about the lines that were in front of me, and the families wept, and some of them still telephone me at Nowruz.

If a made line reads, and a reader reads it, and the family is comforted, and the dead woman is buried under a sentence that a man drew in a room over a car park in 1987 —

what, exactly, is missing?

I could not find it. I sat there until it got light and I could not find the missing thing, and that is when I understood that Parvaneh Rafi'i had not been defending herself in that consulting room.

She had been reciting.

PART FOURTEEN — THE TUFT

It was Parvaneh who told me, and she did not tell me kindly, and I have come to think that was correct.

She telephoned the house. That in itself frightened me — nobody telephones this house except about deaths — and she said, “Bring the photographs,” and put the phone down.

I took the whole run. Fourteen months of them, every eleven days, in the folders, in two carrier bags, and I drove out to the ring road on a Tuesday morning in the fourteenth month with my wife’s face on the passenger seat.

She cleared the desk with her forearm. Then she put them up on the lightbox in order, six at a time, and stood back, and we went through fourteen months of Sanam in about forty minutes without either of us saying very much.

Then she took down all but two.

The first frame and the last.

“Look at the nose,” she said.

* * *

I had not looked at the nose in a year.

You have to understand why, and it is not stupidity, it is training. The nose is not one of the seven. In a woman there is nothing on the nose at all — the two nostril lines are paternal, they arrive with the beard, she never had them and never would. The nose is *ground*. It is the blank part of the page, the space the letters sit on, and a reader learns in his first year to look through it the way you look through the white of a page to the writing.

I had spent fourteen months reading the lines. The whole lineage had. There is not one sentence about her nose in the entire archive.

“Look at it,” Parvaneh said again.

And I looked, and the nose in the first photograph and the nose in the last photograph were not the same nose.

The bridge in the early frame was straight and narrow and very slightly scooped, the shape you see on half the young women in this country and on none of their mothers. In the late frame it was not. There was a small fullness in it, low down and to the right, and the tip had come down perhaps two millimetres, and there was a fractional widening at the base on the side where everything was going.

"That is the illness," I said. "It is taking that side."

"No."

"It is taking everything on that side."

"Mansur." She said my name and not my title, and I noticed it, and I think she meant me to. "The illness takes fat and muscle and bone. It thins. Everything it touches goes *down* and gets *smaller*." She put two fingers on the late frame. "That is bigger."

* * *

She explained it to me twice, because I did not take it the first time.

I am going to put it here the way she put it the second time, in the plainest words she had, standing at a lightbox with her hands behind her back.

When you make a nose smaller, she said, you do not take the nose off and put a smaller one on. You take pieces out. You take out cartilage — the springy stuff, not bone, the part you can bend between your fingers at the end of your own nose. You take some of it out and you rearrange what is left and you hold it in the new shape with stitches, and then the body heals around the new shape and calls it home.

But the body did not agree to it. The body is holding that shape the way a man holds a heavy suitcase: for as long as he is asked to, and not one minute longer.

Everything in that nose has been under tension for twenty-five years.

Now something comes along and thins the ground underneath the whole right side of her face. It takes the padding out from under

the work. It softens what was holding, and the stitches are long gone, and the tension has nothing to pull against any more.

And the shape lets go.

Not fast. Over months. It does not spring back — nothing springs back after twenty-five years — it *drifts*, a little at a time, in the only direction it was ever going to drift, which is back towards the shape it was cut out of.

“Her face is not being destroyed,” said Parvaneh Rafi’i. “It is being **undone**.”

* * *

We stood there.

I want to describe what happened in me and I have never managed it properly. It was not a realisation. A realisation is a thing that arrives. This was more like a floor being taken out from under a floor.

Because if that was true of the nose, it was true of everything.

The brows. Both of them taken up at the ends, at nineteen, with a blade. That work sits in the same soft ground, held by the same tension, and the ground on the right had been thinning for fourteen months.

Her right brow had not *dropped*.

It had been let go of.

It had come down, over fourteen months, towards the place it had been in before a man in a room over a car park drew a second picture of a nineteen-year-old and then made the picture true. And I had sat on the floor of my bedroom in the fourth month with a lamp on a folded towel and read that motion and called it a descender — the stroke a scribe pulls down at the end of a word to say *this closes here* — and I had written in a notebook that it was the finest thing I had ever read.

And the hairline. Lifted at the temples, both sides, at nineteen, because she had her father’s temples and hated them. Fourteen months of thinning ground underneath a lifted hairline. Of course it

bowed. Of course it broke. It broke exactly where a blade had gone in twenty-five years earlier, and thirty adults argued for six weeks about what a broken line meant in the eyes of God, and not one of us — not one — asked why it had broken *there*.

Everything I had read as revelation was the sound of an old operation coming apart.

* * *

And then the second floor went, which is the one I actually live on now.

Because it does not follow that the readings were wrong.

Turn it over. Go slowly. For fourteen months I read a face that was moving, and everything I read on it was better than anything I had ever read on her — denser, stranger, more determined, arguing with itself. I did not invent that. Six other readers found the same and wrote it down independently in four houses in this province.

What was underneath the forgery was **better than the forgery**.

The face she was born with — the one a nineteen-year-old girl cried about for a year and a mother paid to have taken away, the one with her father's temples and a heavy nose and brows that sat where brows sit — that face was the finer text. It always was. It was under there the whole time, and the only thing that ever brought it back up into the light was an illness eating my wife alive.

I have not been able to decide, in the time since, which of these two sentences is true, and I have come to believe that the doctrine cannot decide either:

The disease is destroying the writing.

The disease is *restoring* it.

28

I asked her for the page.

Not the index. I had stopped wanting the index somewhere on the drive out, and I told her so, and I meant it. One page. The page with my wife on it, from the summer of the year we met, and I said I

would not ask her for a name and I would not ask her for another sheet as long as I lived.

Parvaneh looked at me for a long time.

Then she went downstairs and was gone eleven minutes and came back up with a single leaf out of a ledger, cut out, which she had done with a blade in an office by herself rather than let me hold the book, and she put it face down on the desk and kept her hand on it.

"You understand what you are asking for."

"Yes."

"No," she said. "You understand what is on the front. You do not understand what is at the bottom." She took her hand away. "I am sorry. That is not a thing I have said in this building before."

* * *

The date was the fourth month of that year. Two months before I had ever heard her name.

The first drawing was a nineteen-year-old girl with heavy temples and a strong nose and level brows, and even in that fast working outline, even in three-quarter view with the ground barely indicated, I could read her. It was Sanam. It was Sanam more than the woman I married was Sanam, and I sat down without meaning to.

The second drawing was my wife.

I mean that flatly. The second drawing, the proposed one, the one with the seven lines redrawn and the little marginal notes about how each would sit against the ones around it — that was the face I had read across a plate of sweets in a front room in the autumn, and across a table for twenty-four years, and I knew every stroke of it the way you know a door in the dark.

And in the margin beside the second drawing, in the hand I write in, four words:

clean. will read easily.

* * *

At the bottom of the page there is a line for the operator, and it is signed, because every page in that room is signed, because they are careful people and always have been.

H. Rafi'i.

* * *

I did not do anything for a while.

Then I did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic is the reason I have written this book, and it is very simple and anyone can do it.

The fourth month. He drew that face in the fourth month.

In the sixth month of that same year, Hormoz Rafi'i came to my father's house — I was twenty-four and I have the day itself, I have what I was wearing — and sat in the front room and told my parents that it was time I was married, and that there was a family in Anjirab with a daughter, and that he had heard she was a clean copy.

He had heard.

He had drawn it. He had drawn it eight weeks earlier in a room over a car park, on a nineteen-year-old girl who had cried at her mother for a year, and he had written *will read easily* in the margin in the handwriting he was at that time still correcting on me with his thumb.

And then he waited eight weeks for the swelling to go down, and then he went to my father's house.

* * *

I have tried, for a year, to find another reading of that page. I want to put the alternatives down because I owe it to a dead man who loved me.

Perhaps it is coincidence. Four thousand women. In a city this size he would have cut half the young women I might have married; the odds of a page are not the odds of a plot.

Perhaps *will read easily* is a professional note and nothing more. It is what he wrote on hundreds of pages. It means the work will heal clean.

Perhaps he thought he was doing a kindness twice over — a girl made happy, a student given a wife whose face would not fight him.

Perhaps.

But I keep coming back to a thing that is not evidence and that I cannot get rid of, which is that in twenty-six years that man never once told me he had a daughter who was a surgeon, or that he worked in a building on the ring road, or that our doctrine had a second half.

He taught me to read.

He did not teach me that there was writing in the world that had been done by a hand like mine.

And I have sat in four hundred and eleven front rooms and told four hundred and eleven families what God had written on the faces of their dead, in a hand I learned from him, in a city he had been quietly editing since before I was born.

THE FOUR

pe · che · zhe · gaf — the letters that arrived late

29 — PE

I went back one more time, to say the thing I had driven out there to say, and she let me say all of it.

I said: he made her.

I said: your father made my wife, eight weeks before he came to my father's house, and wrote in the margin that she would read easily, and then handed her to a boy he was teaching to read.

I said a number of things after that which I am not going to put down, and Parvaneh Rafi'i sat behind her desk and took them, and did not once tell me to lower my voice, which I was not lowering.

When I had finished she said: "Sit down."

I sat down.

"Now I am going to give you the only comfort available," she said, "and you are not going to like it, and it is still the only one."

And she recited to me, from memory, in a consulting room, the passage from the Book of Eternity about the four letters.

* * *

She did it properly. She did it the way it is done in a courtyard, in the cadence, without hurrying, and she is not a reader and has never stood up in front of the lineage in her life, and she had it word for word, which told me who had taught it to her and when.

Four letters, she said. *Pe, che, zhe, gaf*. Made by men. Made in a workshop, out of letters that already existed, by putting dots on them, eight hundred years after the revelation closed, because a Persian mouth makes four sounds an Arab mouth does not and the scribes needed to write their own language down.

Everyone knows this. It is not hidden. It is not a scandal. It is in any book on the alphabet.

And the man from this city, who saw the glory in Tabriz in the fasting month and had his head taken off for it twenty years later, wrote that those four letters are pre-eternal. That they were among the names given to Adam in the first minute of the world. That the

scribes who thought they were inventing were remembering, and that their hands were being run, and that a letter added by a man in good faith and a letter written by God are the same letter and no instrument in creation can separate them.

"That is your doctrine," she said. "Not mine. Yours. It is the load-bearing wall of the whole house. Take it out and the thirty-two collapses into twenty-eight and the fourteen collapses and the seven collapses and your entire lineage is a family of men who look at hair.

"So you may have one of two things.

"You may have a doctrine in which what my family has done for four generations is scripture — in which case your teacher wrote your wife the way God wrote the four letters, and you have been reading his hand and God's hand and they are the same hand and there is no crime because there is no difference.

"Or you may have a test. You may have some way of telling the true line from the made one. And on the day you produce it, you will have proved that four letters of the Persian alphabet are counterfeit, and the thirty-two is a lie, and everything your people have believed since 1374 goes into the fire with it.

"You cannot have your outrage and your doctrine. They are the same wall."

She let me sit with it.

Then she said, more quietly: "I have known this since I was fifteen. My father sat me down in this room and gave it to me exactly as I have given it to you, and I want you to understand that he was not being clever. He was frightened. It was the only thing he had that let him keep doing this and keep believing, and he handed it to me because he could not carry it by himself any more."

"He did not hand it to me."

"No," said Parvaneh. "He gave you the reading. He kept the cutting. I have thought about that my whole life and the kindest thing I can make of it is that he wanted one person in this lineage who could still look at a face and simply believe it."

30 — CHE

Golnaz asked me to read her.

It was three weeks after the page. The visits had thinned — I do not know why, and I have a theory I will not write down — and the house was quiet again for the first time in a year, and she came on a Tuesday and we sat in the back room under the north window and she said it as though she had been carrying it up the path.

"I want you to read me. Properly. For the archive."

"No."

"Ostad—"

"No."

"Why?"

And I said, because I was tired and because I had stopped being careful: "Because I would be reading a page that a family of surgeons wrote on you when you were seventeen, and putting it into the archive of this lineage in my teacher's handwriting, and calling it the word of God."

Golnaz did not say anything for a while.

Then she said: "Sanam is in the back bedroom."

"I know where my wife is."

"You have read Sanam nine times in the dark and once a week for a year in front of strangers, and you have just told me that a face like mine is not fit to go in the book." She was not crying. I would have preferred it if she had been. "Say what you mean. Say it properly and I will go."

And there was nothing available to me, because she was correct, and because a man who will read one made face and not another is not making a judgement about scripture. He is making a judgement about which women he can bear to be wrong about.

So I read her.

I did it badly — I want that recorded, because it was the last reading I have taken and it was the worst work of my life. I could

not hold the discipline. I kept seeing where the ends of the brows had been lifted, which I had never once seen in eleven previous readings of the same girl and which I could not now stop seeing, and twice I lost the ground entirely and had to go back to the top of the page.

It took four hours. It should have taken ninety minutes.

At the end I gave her the sentence, and it was thin, and she wrote it down in her own hand and thanked me and put her shoes on in the hall.

At the door she said: "You have taught me for nearly two years."

"Yes."

"You have never once asked me what I think it says."

"What do you think it says?"

"Not now," said Golnaz Ehsani. "I am going to be the one who reads *you*, one day, and I would like to come to it clean."

31 — ZHE

Here is where it stands, and I am going to set it out flatly, because I have discovered that the flat version is the only one I can look at.

The hollowing is finishing. That is not hope and it is not a doctor being kind; it burns out, in most people, after some years, and everyone who has looked at her since the autumn says the same thing in the same careful voice. It is slowing. It will stop. It has taken what it is going to take.

Which means that in some month, without any announcement, my wife's face will be **finished**.

Not healed. Finished, the way a book is finished. Four lines and a fragment, held in whatever arrangement it has arrived at, and no more writing.

And on that day there are two things I may do, and they are both obedience, and I have been sitting with them since the spring.

* * *

The first is to do nothing.

Let it stand. Let the undoing be complete. Let the temples she was born with come back and the brows sit where her mother's sat and the nose be her father's nose, and hold that what has happened is a restoration — that a girl was forged at nineteen by a man in a room over a car park, and that God has spent fourteen months patiently rubbing it out, and that the face at the end of this is the one that was issued to her.

It is a good reading. It is defensible on every page of our books. It also requires me to say, out loud, to my wife, that the thing that ruined her life was a correction.

The second is to telephone Parvaneh Rafi'i.

Because it can be helped. Not undone — nothing is undone — but there are things that can be put back under the ground on that side, and a brow that has let go can be lifted again, and a woman who cannot close her eye can be given an eyelid that closes, and my wife has not slept a full night without tape on her face in fourteen months.

The books permit it. That is the part I did not expect and it took me a long time to find. The old ruling that curses the ones who alter what God has made — the plucked brow, the filed tooth — has a clause on the end of it that nobody quotes, and the clause says: *except in the treatment of disease*. It is not beautification if it is repair. Every scholar in every school agrees on that and has for a thousand years.

So I would not even be sinning. I would be permitted, in writing, by everyone.

And I would be sitting in a chair in that clinic while a Rafi'i cut my wife's face into a shape that I chose, in the room where her father cut it into a shape *he* chose, and I would be the second man in her life to draw a second picture of her.

* * *

There is no third thing. I have looked for a year.

And the doctrine will not help me, because the doctrine is not neutral between them — it is *enthusiastic* about both. It says the writing is living and continuous, so the illness is authorship. It says a letter added by a man in good faith cannot be told from a letter written by God, so the surgery is authorship.

Whatever I do, I am obeying.

That is the answer I was given. I asked for six hundred years and I was answered by all of it at once, and the answer was: *yes*.

32 — GAF

She sits in the chair under the north window in the afternoons because the light is good and because it is habit now, and neither of us has moved it back.

Yesterday there was a low sun coming in under the cloud, the way it does here in the winter for about twenty minutes before it goes, and the whole room went the colour of weak tea.

I had the telephone in my hand. I had had it in my hand for most of an hour. The number is on a card in my wallet and it has been in my wallet since the Thursday of the photographs, and I have taken it out perhaps two hundred times, and it is soft at the corners now the way card goes.

She had her eyes shut. Not asleep. She does that in the afternoons, sits with them shut and her hands in her lap, and I used to think she was resting and she told me once that she is simply having the only twenty minutes of the day in which nobody is looking at her face, and that I could stay if I did not talk.

I stayed. I did not talk.

Then, without opening her eyes, my wife said:

“What does it say today?”

* * *

And there it is. That is the whole thing. That is what I have been walking towards since a girl put her hands under her thighs in this room and told me where she got her nose.

Because she is asking for a reading. She has asked me for one every day since the autumn, and I have given her one every day since the autumn, and there is not one of them that has been the truth.

I could tell her what is on her face. Four lines and a fragment, arguing, and every one of them in the middle of coming apart from an operation in 1987, and the finest text I have ever read in my life, and none of it hers, or all of it hers, depending on a question that no instrument in creation can settle.

I could tell her that a man I loved drew her on a Tuesday in the fourth month and wrote in the margin that she would read easily.

I could tell her nothing, and pick up the telephone.

Or I could do the thing she asked me for in the dark in the ninth month, in the kitchen, with the light off — *say one thing that is not on my face* — and I have had two years to find it, and I have found it, and I have not said it yet, and I do not know whether I am going to.

The sun was going. It goes fast here.

My wife sat in the chair with her eyes shut and her hands in her lap and waited, the way she has waited for twenty-four years, and I put the telephone down on the arm of the chair.

And I opened my mouth.

GLOSSARY

alif a-LEEF — Arabic/Persian. first letter of the alphabet. A single vertical stroke, undecorated, with the counting value of one. It stands for unity and for the beginning of the alphabet, and it is the mark a scribe makes first when testing a new pen.

Alinja a-leen-JAA — place name. Nakhchivan. The mountain fortress where Fazlallah Astarabadi was beheaded in 1394 on the order of Miranshah. His grave there became a place of pilgrimage, circled seven times and then seven times again.

ana'l-Haqq a-nal-HAQQ — Arabic. 'I am the Truth'. The declaration of the Sufi martyr Hallaj, executed in Baghdad for it in 922. Nesimi took it into his verse, and it is arguably what he was flayed for rather than the doctrine of letters.

Astarabad as-taa-raa-BAAD — Persian. the old name of Gorgan. The north-eastern Iranian city where Fazlallah Astarabadi was born. The name fell out of use in the twentieth century, which is why few people connect the founder of Hurufism with the modern town.

Darmangah-e Nur dar-maan-GAAH-eh NOOR — Persian. 'the Light

dervish DER-vish — Persian darvish. a poor man. A member of a Sufi order; in the older sense, a wandering ascetic who owns one bag, keeps no house, and is fed by strangers.

Fatiha FAA-teh-heh — Arabic. 'the opening'. The first chapter of the Qur'an, seven verses long. Hurufi doctrine reads its seven against the seven maternal lines of the face.

Fazlallah Astarabadi fazl-ol-LAAH as-taa-raa-baa-DEE — Arabic/Persian. merchant's son and celebrated interpreter of dreams before his vision in Tabriz. Author of the Book of Eternity. Beheaded at Alinja.

Firishteoglu fee-rish-teh-OH-loo — Turkish. ‘son of the angel’. The scholar who rendered the Hurufi doctrine into Turkish some sixty years after Fazlallah’s death, and by whose version much of it survived.

Gilan gee-LAAAN — place name. northern Iran. Caspian province of Iran.

Gorgan gor-GAAN — place name. north-eastern Iran. The modern city built where Astarabad stood. The setting of this novella.

Haji Sorkh haa-JEE SORKH — Persian. ‘the red pilgrim’. Leader of the Hurufi rising in Isfahan in 1431, in which two sons of the governor were killed. Taken alive and skinned.

Hallaj hal-LAAJ — Arabic. ‘the wool-carder’. Mansur al-Hallaj, the Sufi executed in Baghdad in 922 for declaring ana’l-Haqq. An early influence on Fazlallah.

he-ye do-cheshm heh-yeh do-CHESHM — Persian. ‘ha with two eyes’. The Persian name for a form of the letter ha, so called because in the flowing nasta’liq hand it resembles a pair of eyes. A genuine teaching device of calligraphers, and a small gift to letter-mystics.

Hormoz hor-MOZ — Persian given name. The first name of Ostad Rafi’i.

Hurufi hoo-ROO-fee — Arabic huruf. letters. An adherent of the doctrine that God is the twenty-eight and thirty-two letters, and that the human face is not like scripture but is scripture.

istiva, khatt-e khat-teh es-tee-VAA — Arabic istawa. ‘he settled’. The line of settling: the vertical axis down the centre of the face, from hairline to chin. Not one of the fourteen letters but the place from which they are read — taken from the Qur’anic verse that God settled upon the throne, which Fazlallah read as the throne of Adam’s form.

Javdan-nama jaa-vee-DAAN naa-MEH — Persian. ‘the Book of Eternity’. Fazlallah’s chief work, written in the dialect of his own province and preserved because his daughter copied it out by hand.

Kaaba KAA-beh — Arabic. ‘the cube’. The black cube at Mecca which every Muslim faces in prayer. Hurufi doctrine read it as the face and head of Adam, the sevenfold circumambulation standing for the maternal lines and the second seven for the paternal.

Kalimat-Allah al-‘Ulya ka-lee-MAT-ol-laah al-OL-yaa — Arabic. ‘the preserved his book by copying it and who was burned with some five hundred others at Tabriz in 1441.

Karbala kar-ba-LAA — place name. Iraq. Where the grandson of the Prophet was killed in 680; a place of pilgrimage for Shi’a Muslims.

Khorasan kho-raa-SAAN — place name. eastern Iran. Province with an early Hurufi following.

khutut-e abiya kho-TOOT-eh a-BEE-yeh — Arabic/Persian. ‘the paternal Adam: the hair down each side of the face, the two halves of the moustache, the hair in each nostril, and the tuft between the lower lip and the chin. Women do not receive them.

khutut-e ummiya kho-TOOT-eh om-MEE-yeh — Arabic/Persian. ‘the descending from Eve: the hairline, the two eyebrows, and the four sets of eyelashes.

Kordkuy kord-KOO-ee — place name. Golestan province. A town west of Gorgan.

Miranshah mee-raan-SHAAH — Persian. ‘prince-king’. Son of Timur and governor of Azerbaijan, who ordered Fazlallah’s execution and who was, by most accounts including his family’s, going mad in those years.

Nakhchivan nakh-chee-VAAN — place name. South Caucasus. The mountainous region containing Alinja.

nasta’liq nas-taa-LEEGLH — Persian. a calligraphic hand. The flowing, hanging script in which most Persian literary manuscripts are written.

Naubar now-BAR — place name. Tabriz. A quarter of the city of Tabriz.

Nesimi neh-see-MEE — pen name. Arabic nasim, breeze. The greatest Hurufi poet, who met Fazlallah once. Flayed alive at Aleppo early in the fifteenth century. Tradition holds that he went on reciting.

ostad os-TAAD — Persian. master, teacher. The man who taught you your trade and to whom you never stop owing it. You do not call him by his name, alive or dead.

pe, che, zhe, gaf PEH, CHEH, ZHEH, GAAF — the four Persian letters. The four letters Persian has and Arabic does not — the sounds in pedar (father), chesm (eye), muzhde (good news) and gol (flower). Scribes built them centuries after the revelation closed by adding dots to existing letters. Hurufi doctrine holds them nonetheless to be pre-eternal, among the names taught to Adam — and therefore that a letter added by a human hand cannot be distinguished from one written by God.

Sarmadi sar-maa-DEE — Arabic sarmad. everlasting. Family name.

Shirvan sheer-VAAN — place name. South Caucasus. Region with an early Hurufi following.

Tabriz tab-REEZ — place name. north-western Iran. Where Fazlallah received the manifestation of glory in 1374, and where some five hundred Hurufis were burned in 1441.

Timur tee-MOOR — Turkic. ‘iron’. The conqueror known in Europe as Tamerlane. Fazlallah attempted to convert him.

zuhur-e kebriya zo-HOOR-eh keb-ree-YAA — Arabic/Persian. ‘the Tabriz in the fasting month of 1374. He never described the event, only what he was given by it.

In a provincial Iranian city, three families keep a doctrine the world burned six hundred years ago. They hold that the human face is not like scripture. It is scripture — fourteen lines of divine writing, seven inherited from Eve and seven from Adam, an alphabet laid out in hair and bone.

Mansur Sarmadi is their reader. When one of them dies he reads the face aloud, and the reading is the funeral.

Then his wife's face begins to fail. A clean vertical groove opens down her brow, and the hollowing starts, and her seven lines go one at a time. Doctrine has no provision for a corrupted text, only for a false one. So he begins reading her in secret while she sleeps, and finds the new lines say something better than the old ones ever did.

His people discover the notebook and do not condemn him. They cannot. They ratify him instead, and his dying wife becomes a text under study — visited, photographed, transcribed by strangers in her own front room. Then he learns what the families have been doing for four generations in a clinic on the ring road, and that they do not consider it blasphemy. They consider it copying.

A doctrine that will not forbid anything cannot protect anyone.

