

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 67



سید ناکجا آباد
**SAYYID
OF NOWHERE**

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

SAYYID OF NOWHERE

سید ناکجا آباد

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 67

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.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-66-7

Roya Publications

Publication No. 67

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

12.V.1963

اتاق سنگی
امامزاده نور
شورآباد

measured
in situ

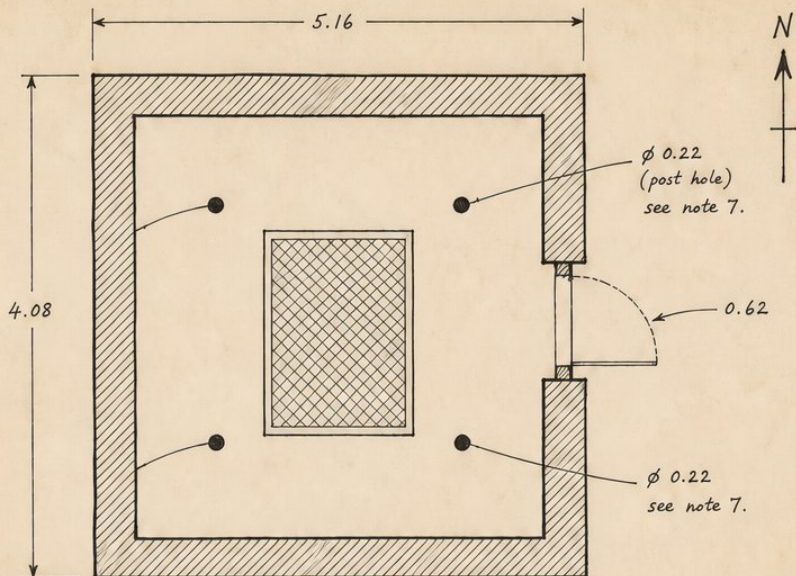
همه اندازه ها
به متر

ارتفاع دیوار
تقریباً 2.35 م

17.V.63

stone
uncertain

see field
note 14.



FLOOR PLAN



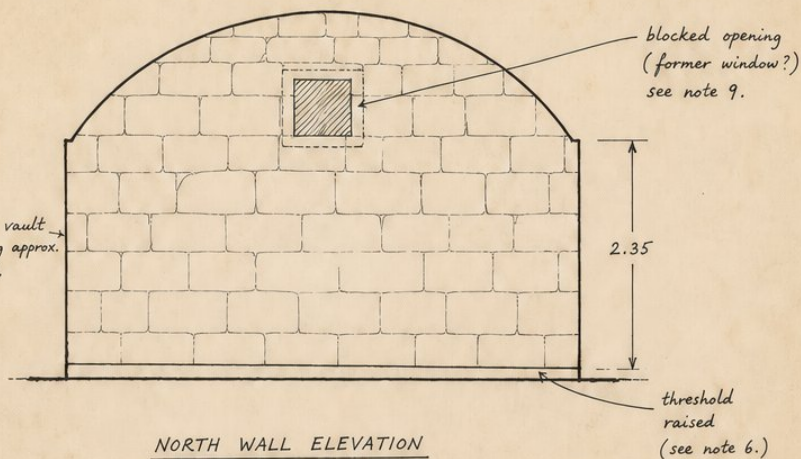
revised 1966
(14.III.66)
dims. corrected
5.20 5.16

north wall
interior

نمای داخل
دیوار شمالی

بدون اندود
اجزای سنگ
نامنظم

barrel vault
springing approx.
2.35 m.



NORTH WALL ELEVATION
(viewed from inside)

12.V.1963

R.M.

تغییرات بعدی در
یادداشت های میدانی
ثبت شده است.

17.V.63

DEPT. OF ANTIQUITIES KHORASAN REGION	SITE RECORD
SITE: SHURABAD	SHEET 4
STRUCTURE: EMAMZADEH NUR — INNER CHAMBER	SCALE: 1:50
DRAWN BY: R.M.	DATE: 1966
REF. NO.: TK 7/SR 63	A. R. 1345

SYNOPSIS

A career burglar walks out of a hospital in Mashhad wearing a dead cleric's clothes. He takes them because they are on a chair and nobody is watching the chair. He does not look at the colour of the turban.

It is black. Black means *sayyid* — descent from the Prophet. He has not faked a job. He has faked a bloodline.

He gets off a bus in a salt town at the end of a road, intending to stay twelve days, and is met by nine men who have been waiting eleven nights for a replacement custodian. They take his bag from him by force, in the way of the country, and walk him up the hill to the shrine.

He stays fourteen months.

Sayyid of Nowhere is the account he wrote afterwards, set down as forty numbered lessons to a successor who does not yet know he is one. It is the record of a man with no theology and one professional skill — the ability to read a room, inherited from an illiterate mother who could tell you who was pregnant before the tea arrived — discovering that the skill is the whole of the job, and that the job is real, and that the good he does in the wrong clothes cannot be told apart from the good done in the right ones.

He invents scripture and watches it enter circulation. He falls in love with the woman who runs the shrine kitchen and can conduct the entire affair only through liturgy, at a distance of four feet, in front of witnesses. He is very nearly caught, weekly, by a nineteen-year-old from Qom who knows the sources cold and who instead of an accusation builds a defence. He goes into a sealed stone chamber on the third night of a vigil, in smoke, and is addressed by something that knows the name they called him in prison.

And on an ordinary afternoon a girl gets off the morning bus with a plastic folder, asking for the sayyid who signs things, and gives her name at the gate.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book began with a costume and an uncomfortable question that the costume makes it impossible to avoid: does moral authority come from the clothes and the institution, or from what a person actually does?

The honest answer, as far as I have been able to get to one, is *neither, exactly* — and the not-quite-answer is the reason this is a novel and not an essay.

I have wanted for a long time to write something that laughs. Everything in this imprint until now has been made in the dark, on purpose, and I do not regret any of it. But there is a particular register available in Persian that I have never used here and that I have been carrying around since childhood: a way of being funny about catastrophe that is not denial and is not bravery either, that runs underneath the whole culture like a service tunnel, and that is at its sharpest precisely where things are worst. A people who have had that much history done to them develop a sense of humour with load-bearing walls. Nader Fani talks the way my uncles talk. So does his daughter, which is the thing he cannot mention.

The other thing I wanted was to be fair to the coat.

It would have been very easy — and would have made a much stupider book — to write the clergy as villains and the fraud as the only honest man in the building. That is a satire I have no interest in. What interested me was the middle of it: the mid-fifties man with a bad back and a daughter's wedding to fund, who stopped believing twenty years ago and stays because eleven hundred people need somebody to bury their mothers properly, and who knows exactly what else his staying maintains. The garment that lets a man walk into the worst hour of a stranger's life is the same garment the careerists are wearing. It is the mercy and it is the crime and it is one object. That is not hypocrisy. That is the actual arrangement, in every institution I have ever looked at closely, and most of us are inside one.

A word on the smoke, since readers will assume I invented it. Esfand — wild rue — is burned in every taxi, shop and doorway in Iran to turn away the evil eye. It is sold in paper cones by children at traffic lights. It is also *Peganum harmala*, and it carries harmine and harmaline, the same compounds that form the backbone of ayahuasca; a number of scholars have argued that it was the original *haoma* of the Zoroastrian sacrifice. Nobody in Iran calls it a drug. It is what your grandmother does when you get a promotion. Burn enough of it in a stone room with no vent, over people who have been fasting and grieving and awake for three nights, and things happen. Everything in this book that occurs in that chamber is chemically and architecturally plausible, and none of it required anyone to be deceived about what they were breathing. The best hiding place is the category nobody looks at.

There is a film underneath all of this, and I would rather name it than have it noticed: *Marmoulak*, Kamal Tabrizi, 2004. I owe it the premise and the nerve. It was pulled from Iranian cinemas within weeks of becoming a hit. What it understood, and what I have tried to carry over, is that the sharp version of this story is not *religion is a fraud*. The sharp version is that religion without humanity is hollow, and a man with no credentials whatsoever may walk into genuine spirituality sideways, by accident, through compassion, while being extremely funny about it.

Nader would want me to add that he never carried a weapon.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

PART ONE — THE WALL

1. Knock first.	14
2. A locked door is only an opinion.	17
3. Never run from a place you can walk out of.	19
4. If a stranger kisses your hand, find out why before you enjoy it.	20
5. Ask for a town nobody wants.	22
6. Accept the room. The room is the alibi.	24
7. Say it, then stop talking.	27
8. The famous ones get checked. The obscure ones never do.	29
9. A student is a witness who has volunteered.	31

PART TWO — THE SMOKE

- | | |
|--|----|
| 10. Bless the kitchen. Nobody has ever blessed the kitchen. | 35 |
| 11. Never answer a question you understand. | 37 |
| 12. Grief does not want an explanation. It wants a witness
with good posture. | 39 |
| 13. Attention is the only currency I ever counted correctly. | 41 |
| 14. A woman who mocks you is doing you a courtesy. | 43 |
| 15. Never be alone with what you want. Institute a committee. | 45 |
| 16. Every priesthood is a trade with a uniform. That is not the
scandal. That is the mercy. | 47 |
| 17. The tray. | 50 |
| 18. If God speaks to you, be polite. If He does not, be quicker. | 51 |

PART THREE — THE LEDGER

- | | |
|--|----|
| 19. Nobody looks at a cleric's face. | 57 |
| 20. A document is a wall with a door in it, and the door is a person. | 59 |
| 21. When you cannot say no, say yes at a length nobody can survive. | 60 |
| 22. Let them do the material. Nod at the punchlines. | 62 |
| 23. If you must invent scripture, invent it against yourself. | 64 |
| 24. A woman who can measure you by eye has already done it. | 67 |
| 25. A shrine is a business with a saint on the letterhead. Read the books. | 69 |
| 26. I have entered the tradition. I have contributed. | 71 |
| 27. A student who cannot convict you will acquit the whole world instead. | 73 |

PART FOUR — THE FIRE

28. A leash is easier to wear than a rope. That is the point of it. 77
29. Everyone in the building has made my arrangement. That is not a comfort. 80
30. She has her mother's flatness and my jokes, and I did the only paternal act available to a man in my position, which was surveillance. 82
31. I never carried a weapon. Count how many times I have said it. 84
32. A room built for a purpose will tell you the purpose. It has nothing else to talk about. 86
33. Go in looking for the trick. Find the trick. Watch it work anyway. 89
34. A fraud can survive being believed. He cannot survive being known. 92
35. Eleven weeks. Count them. 94

PART FIVE — THE HANDOVER

36. When they come to test you, say nothing and let the boy talk. 99
37. The generous offer is the cage. They are always generous. That is how the door shuts quietly. 101
38. 103
39. Take the student. Do it knowing exactly what you are. 105
40. Burn it yourself. 106

PART ONE — THE WALL

Lessons One to Nine

1.

Knock first.

The stone in my gallbladder was the size of a chickpea, and it saved my life, which should tell you how God conducts His business. He does not send angels. He sends sediment.

I had been in Vakilabad [va-keel-aa-BAAD] four years by then and had made a study of the place the way a man makes a study of his own hand. There were eleven ways out of that building and I had ruled out ten of them by my second winter. The eleventh was medical, and the eleventh required an organ to betray me, and I had been waiting on that betrayal with the patience of a man waiting for a bus in a country where the buses have been discontinued.

I want to say something about patience, because it is the only virtue I have ever possessed and I would like it noted before we go any further.

I was a thief. I was not a good man and I was not a clever man, but I was a patient one, and in my trade patience is worth more than either. Anyone can go through a window. The art is in the four hours before the window, sitting in a stairwell with your hands folded, listening to a building settle, letting a family finish an argument two floors up and go to bed unhappy. I could sit in a stairwell longer than most men can sit in their own living rooms. I was famous for it, in the small and idiotic way that men in my line become famous for things.

I also never carried a weapon. Not once, not a knife, not a length of pipe, in twenty-seven years. I would like that noted here at the front where it can be found.

They called me Panjshanbeh [panj-shan-BEH]. Thursday.

I worked Thursday nights and only Thursday nights. There were reasons. Thursday night in Iran is the night the whole country goes to somebody's mother's house, and a family at somebody's mother's house is a family not at home, and a family not at home is a proposition. That was the practical reason and it was a good one. The other reason was that Friday is the holy day, and I did not want

to be caught working on it, because I did not believe in God and saw no need to be rude to Him.

I have thought about that sentence a great deal since. At the time I considered it a joke.

The name was given to me by a man in Block Three who intended it as an insult and who was, in fairness, entitled to. *Here he comes*, he'd say, *here comes the weekend*. He died of something in his chest the winter before my transfer and I was sorrier than I expected to be, which is the whole of my eulogy for him and more than he got from anyone else.

I also wore reading glasses on jobs. I did not need them. I had discovered at nineteen that a man in reading glasses looks like a man with an appointment, and a man with an appointment is invisible in this country, because nobody has ever once had an appointment. Twenty-seven years I wore those glasses. I have never had my eyes tested. My eyes are excellent. That is not a boast, it is a complaint — a man with my eyes should have seen more coming.

And I knocked. Always. Before every door I ever opened that was not mine, I knocked, twice, unhurried, the way my father knocked on the doors of customers who owed him money. If someone answered I became a man looking for an address, and I apologised, and I apologised beautifully, and I left. I have knocked on six hundred doors in this country and apologised at perhaps eighty of them, and I want you to hold onto that number, because later on somebody is going to tell you that I am a man who takes what he wants, and I want you to have the arithmetic in front of you when they do.

Now. The infirmary.

They put me on a bed by the window because I was not violent and because the orderly's cousin knew a man I had once not informed on. I lay there for two days with my knees up and something in my side turning over like a slow engine, and on the second afternoon Sarhang Zaker [sar-HANG ZAA-ker] came to see me.

You should understand about Zaker. In the films the warden is fat and corrupt and sells the prisoners' rice. Zaker was thin, and

honest, and had never taken a bribe in his life, and this is why he was the most frightening man I have ever met. He had a theory. Corrupt men do not have theories. Corrupt men have appetites, and an appetite can be fed, but a theory has to be proved, and he intended to prove his on me.

His theory was that men are made good by pressure.

He said it kindly. He always said it kindly. He sat down on the plastic chair beside my bed, and he asked after my pain, and he meant it, and then he said that he had my file and that in his experience a man of forty-six with a body beginning to fail him is a man at the exact temperature where change becomes possible. He said the word *change* the way a doctor says the name of a procedure he has performed many times successfully.

He had statistics. I want to be honest about this, because it costs me something. He had statistics and they were good. Fewer of his men came back than came back from anywhere else in the province, and he knew the number, and he did not exaggerate it, and he did not need to.

"You have a daughter," he said.

"I have a photograph," I said.

He let that sit. He was very good at letting things sit. Then he stood, and he put the plastic chair back exactly where he had found it — exactly, he adjusted it, I watched him do it — and he said that he would see me when I came back from the hospital, and that we would talk again, and that he was not in a hurry.

That was the sentence that decided it. Not the daughter. *I am not in a hurry.*

Because I knew, lying there with my chickpea, that he was telling the truth. He was not in a hurry. He had eight years of me and a theory to prove and all the time in the world, and he would apply pressure to me kindly, at room temperature, for eight years, and at the end of it I would come out the other side improved, and I would be sixty, and I would be good, and I would be finished.

So I would like to be clear about what I wanted, that afternoon, before any of the rest of it happened. I did not want to be free. Freedom is for young men and people with plans.

I wanted to not be improved.

2.

A locked door is only an opinion.

They took me to Mashhad [mash-HAD] in a Peugeot with a broken window winder and a driver who spent the entire ninety minutes explaining that his brother-in-law had been cheated on a shipment of pistachios. I was chained to the seat frame. I said *no* and *of course* and *what a world* in the appropriate places. I have always been a good passenger.

Here is a thing about hospitals that I knew and Zaker did not, because Zaker had never stolen anything: a hospital is not a building. A hospital is nine or ten buildings that hate each other, joined by corridors, administered by people who are on strike from a department they cannot name. There is no such thing as security in a hospital. There is only paperwork, and paperwork can be outwaited.

They put me in a pre-operative bay on the third floor with a curtain on a rail, and they took the chain off my wrist because the anaesthetist required it, and the guard went to find a form, and I lay there and did what I have always done, which is nothing at all, for a long time, with my hands folded.

Two hours. I want that on the record too. Two hours I lay in that bay with my wrist free and I did not move, because it was three in the afternoon and the corridors were full, and a man who runs at three in the afternoon is a man in a story that ends badly.

At ten past five they wheeled someone into the next bay and drew the curtain and went away and did not come back.

I could see his feet.

I want to describe this correctly, because it is the hinge of my entire life and I have heard it described wrongly by people who

were not there. There was no moment of decision. There was no whisper. Nobody in that room was struck by lightning. I saw a pair of feet in a pair of good shoes, and above the shoes a chair, and on the chair a folded pile of clothes, and I thought — and this is the whole of my thinking, in its entirety, I have examined it many times since and found nothing else in it — *nobody is watching that chair*.

That is not a religious experience. That is a trade.

I got up. My side complained. I went through the curtain like a man going to ask about a bedpan, and there he was, and he was dead. I do not know what he died of. I have wondered. I have wondered a great deal more than you would expect. He was perhaps sixty-five and he had a good face, a really quite good face, the kind of face you get from a life of being listened to, and his hands were arranged on his chest by somebody who had cared enough to arrange them.

I said, out loud, in the empty bay, “Excuse me.”

Then I took his clothes.

The qaba [gha-BAA], the long coat, and the abaya [a-baa-YAA], the black cloak that goes over it, and the wound cloth of the turban, which is called an amameh [ah-maa-MEH], and which I did not know was called an amameh, and which I did not look at, because I was folding it into my armpit under my hospital gown and counting the seconds on the corridor outside.

I want to be very clear. I did not look at the colour.

I have been accused of many things and I have earned most of them, but not that. I did not stand in that bay and calculate. I did not think *black, ah, black, that is the good one*. I did not know there was a good one. I had lived forty-six years in the Islamic Republic of Iran and could not have told you, at gunpoint, that a black turban meant one thing and a white turban meant another. Nobody could. Ask them. Ask the next ten people you meet. They will all say *of course I know that* and then they will change the subject.

His identity card was in the coat pocket. I did not look at that either, not then. I took the shoes as well. They were half a size too big and I wore them for the next eleven months and they ruined my

feet, and I want it understood that everything that came afterwards — the town, the women, the smoke, the girl, all of it — was conducted by a man in the wrong shoes.

I dressed in the stairwell between the third and fourth floors, which took four minutes, three of them spent on the turban, which I wound the way a man winds a turban who has only ever seen one at a distance, on television, on somebody who was shouting.

It looked, I later learned, appalling.

Nobody said anything for six weeks.

3.

Never run from a place you can walk out of.

The corridor. The lifts. The lobby with the fish tank that had no fish in it.

I did not hurry. Hurrying is what they watch for. I put my hands behind my back the way old men do and I went down the stairs at the pace of a man with a bad hip, which required no acting, and I came out into the ground floor concourse at twenty to six in the evening with my heart going like a bird in a bag.

And a boy held the door for me.

Then a woman moved out of my way. Then an orderly pushing a trolley of linen stopped the trolley — stopped it entirely, in the middle of the corridor, and stood back, and waited, and gave me a small bow of the head — so that I could pass.

I did not understand what was happening. I want you to sit with that, because I have had twenty years of people assuming I walked out of that hospital in a glow of criminal triumph, and the truth is that I walked out of it in a state of low-grade panic, convinced that every one of these people had recognised me and was being strange about it.

A man at the pharmacy window turned around, saw me, and lowered his eyes.

I got as far as the car park before I understood, and what I understood was still wrong, but it was closer. I thought: *they are afraid of the clothes.*

That was the third lesson and it took me four more months to correct it. They were not afraid. Fear I would have recognised — I have made a career out of being in rooms with frightened people. This was something else and it was much worse and I did not have a word for it yet.

The gate had a guard on it. There is always a guard. He had a clipboard and a moustache that had taken him a decade and he looked up as I approached and my whole body prepared itself, in the old way, for the sprint I was not going to be able to manage.

He said, “Salaam alaykom, Haj Aqa [haaj AA-ghaa].”

Haj Aqa. Sir. Reverend sir. The thing you call a cleric when you do not know his name.

And I heard myself say — in a voice I had never used before, a voice that came up out of me the way water comes up out of a cracked pipe, deeper than my own, slower than my own, a voice I had been carrying around inside me for forty-six years without ever once having a use for it —

“Alaykom as-salaam.”

He waved me through and went back to his clipboard.

I got fifty metres up the road before I had to stop and put my hand on a wall.

4.

If a stranger kisses your hand, find out why before you enjoy it.

The bus station at Mashhad is a place where the entire nation stands in a queue and complains about the queue, and I have always found it restful. I bought a ticket to the first town I did not recognise on the board. I paid with money from the dead man's coat, seventy thousand tomans [toh-MAANS] and a receipt for a repaired watch, and I have thought about that watch on and off for twenty years, sitting uncollected in a shop in Mashhad, ticking.

The driver would not take my fare.

I held out the ticket and he waved it away with the back of his hand, twice, the second time with a small pained expression as though I had suggested something indecent, and then he took my hand — took it, in both of his — and he kissed it.

On the back. Near the knuckle. A dry, quick, entirely serious kiss.

Then he said, “Ziyarat qabul, Aqa Sayyid.”

May your pilgrimage be accepted, master sayyid.

I sat down in the fourth row.

Now, I want to describe my interior state at this moment as precisely as I am able, because everyone who has ever heard this story assumes that I was delighted, and I was not delighted, I was in something close to physical distress. I had been given back my money. A stranger had kissed my hand. And I did not know the word he had used.

There was a man beside me, sixty, going to see his sister, who told me so within ninety seconds without my asking a single question. I let him talk for twenty minutes. Then I said, in the new voice, in the slow one, “And what do people say now, brother? Out in the world.”

Which is a sentence that means nothing at all, and which I had already discovered got you eleven minutes of material.

Somewhere in the eleven minutes he said, “— and of course, they see the black and they think, ah, a sayyid [saa-YED], this one is from the House, this one is of the blood, God keep them —”

The black.

I did not move. I have sat in stairwells for four hours. I did not move.

I understood, in the space of about four seconds, sitting on a bus in the province of Khorasan [kho-raa-SAAN] with my hands folded in my lap, that the article of clothing on my head was not a uniform. A uniform is a claim about your job. This was a claim about my great-grandfather, and his, and his, running back thirteen centuries to a man in Arabia, and it was not a claim you could make by

studying, or by being appointed, or by being good. It was a claim you could only make by being born, and it could not be granted and it could not be revoked and it could not be earned, and I had taken it off a chair.

I want to record that my first coherent thought was about my father.

My father, Bahman Fani [bah-MAN faa-NEE], locksmith, of Nasser Khosrow [NAA-ser khos-ROW], prayed five times a day for fifty-one years and cheated every customer who ever entered his shop, and when I asked him about this once — I was eleven, I remember the exact tile I was standing on — he looked at me with real bewilderment and said, *God asked me to pray. He did not ask me to charge fairly.* He kept a ledger with God in it, my father. Debits and credits. And by his own accounting he was always, somehow, very slightly ahead.

And I sat on that bus and I thought: *the old thief is going to be extremely pleased about this.*

My second thought was practical. I turned it over the way you turn over a lock. Take it off? Then I am a man in a stolen coat with a shaved neck and no papers and my face on a list in Vakilabad by tomorrow morning. Explain? To whom?

Give it back?

And that, I am sorry to say, is where the whole thing was settled, on the fourth row of a bus, in a sentence I said inside my own head with a small shrug, and which I have never once been able to improve upon:

Well. I can't very well give it back now.

5.

Ask for a town nobody wants.

Shurabad [shoo-raa-BAAD] means Salt-Town, which is not a nickname. It sits at the edge of a flat white nothing that was a lake in the time of the Sasanians and has been a rumour ever since, and

the salt gets into the walls, and the walls come apart slowly from the inside, and everyone there has the same low, patient cough.

Nine hundred people. One road in, which is also the road out, which is a thing I noted immediately and did not think about carefully enough.

I chose it off the board because it was the last stop and because I calculated — correctly — that a town at the end of a road has no traffic in it, and a place with no traffic has no watchers. I intended to be there twelve days. Twelve days to grow the beard out properly, to work out what to do about papers, and then east and over, where a man with a beard and no history can be a great many things.

I have never in my life made a plan that survived contact with a bus timetable.

We came in at ten past nine at night. The bus stops in Shurabad at the top of the square, by the mosque and the shrine, which is called Emamzadeh Nur [eh-maam-zaa-DEH NOOR], the Shrine of the Light, and which is a small blue dome over the grave of a person whose identity has been the subject of a polite and unresolved local argument for four hundred years.

There were nine men waiting in the square.

I saw them through the window as we came up the hill and I did my arithmetic, which was: *nine men, night, no women, a bus*. And I concluded: *somebody on this bus is in trouble*.

I let everyone else off first. This is a habit. You learn more from the back.

Then I came down the steps into the cold with the dead man's bag in my hand, and the whole nine of them came forward at once like water finding a drain, and an old man at the front of them took my hand in both of his and said —

"Sayyid Hadi. Thank God. Thank God. Eleven days we've been meeting that bus."

Eleven days.

I have been asked, many times, why I did not simply say *no*. Why I did not say, in that square, *brother, there has been an error, I am not the man*. And I have given many answers over the years, most of them flattering to me and all of them false, and here is the true one:

Because he was seventy-one years old and he was standing in a cold square at nine o'clock at night, for the eleventh night, and he was so happy.

That is it. That is the entire moral architecture of my decision. I have examined it under better light than this and there is nothing else in there.

His name was Haj Rasoul Sarmadi [haaj ra-SOOL sar-maa-DEE] and he was the trustee of the shrine, and he had a laugh like a door in a draught, and he was the coldest thing in that town, and it would be two months before I found out.

He said, "You must be destroyed. Was it the road? It's the road. It's always the road."

And I said, in the voice, in the slow one, "It was the road."

And nine men laughed, because it was the road, it is always the road, and one of them took my bag away from me by force, in the way of this country, where a bag is a thing you must be relieved of by a stranger before hospitality can be considered to have begun, and we all walked up the hill together in the dark towards the little blue dome, and I turned my head once, in the way that I have, and confirmed that the road behind us went nowhere at all.

6.

Accept the room. The room is the alibi.

The custodian's quarters were two rooms and a yard behind the shrine, with a stove that worked and a window that did not, and a carpet that had been beaten so many times it had achieved a kind of transparency. Haj Rasoul walked me through it holding a paraffin lamp and apologising continuously, in the way of a man showing you a house he is very proud of.

"It's small," he said, of a room I would have paid rent for in Tehran.

"It's more than enough."

"It's a disgrace. The last one had the damp. Not this room. The other room. But it's the same wall, so." He shrugged at the wall. The wall did not respond. "You'll say if there's anything."

"I'll say."

"He won't say," he told the lamp. "They never say."

I unpacked a dead man's bag in front of a stranger, which is an activity I recommend to anyone who believes they have nerve. Three books. A pair of spectacles in a hard case. A comb. A tin of the little wire hooks you use to hang a lamp from a beam. A photograph of a woman, taken in a studio, in the seventies, who was either his mother or his wife and who I have never been able to decide about.

I put the books on the shelf spine-out and I did not open one of them for nine days, and when I finally did, on the ninth night, with the door locked, I discovered that I could read perhaps one word in four, and that the one word was usually *and*.

I have to tell you about the money, because it is the shabbiest part of this and I have never once got out of it cleanly.

There was a tin. Haj Rasoul showed it to me that first night with the lamp in his other hand, in the alcove by the stove, and he lifted the lid so I could see, and inside it was the shrine's small cash — the nazr [NAZR] money, the vow money, what people leave when they want something and what they leave when they got it. Perhaps four million tomans in notes with a rubber band around them.

He said, "For the kitchen, the oil, the whitewash, whatever comes." And he left me alone with it and went home.

Now. I had come out of a hospital nine hours earlier with seventy thousand tomans and a receipt for a watch. That tin was a border. That tin was papers, and a truck, and a man in Zahedan [zaa-heh-DAAN] who does not ask questions, and everything I had said I wanted since the moment I saw a pair of feet in good shoes.

I did not take it.

I want to be precise about why, because when I tell this story people want the answer to be that something moved in me, and nothing moved in me. I did not take it because the old man had shown it to me on the first night, which meant he wanted me to know it was there, which meant he was either the most trusting man in Khorasan or he was counting it, and I had been a professional for twenty-seven years and I did not survive twenty-seven years by taking the first tin I was shown.

He was counting it. Obviously he was counting it. It took me two months to be sure and eight weeks after that to understand what he had actually been measuring, which was not the money.

I slept badly and woke at five to the sound of a woman being extremely rude to a floor.

She was on her knees in the courtyard of the shrine with a bucket and a brush and a length of hose, working the flagstones by the door where nine hundred people a week come in off a salt flat, and she was addressing the ground in a low, fluent, entirely uninterrupted stream that I could not hear the words of and did not need to.

I stood in the dark of my doorway in a dead man's coat and watched a stranger insult a floor at five in the morning, and I thought: *this is the first honest thing I have seen since Mashhad.*

Then she looked up.

I have been looked at by police, by judges, by a man in Karaj [ka-RAJ] who had every reason to kill me and eventually decided not to. This was different in kind. She looked at me for about a second and a half, from her knees, with a wet brush in her hand, and something went across her face that was not deference and was not fear, and she said:

"You're up."

Not *Haj Aqa*. Not *Sayyid*. *You're up*.

"I'm up."

"There's tea." She went back to the floor. "It's terrible."

Her name was Shokouh Aramesh [sho-KOOH aa-raa-MESH], which means Splendour Calm, and which she found funnier than anyone else ever has.

The tea was terrible. I said so. It was the first true statement I had made in that town and it cost me about four years of what I had been.

7.

Say it, then stop talking.

I had four days before the first Friday and I spent them the way a condemned man spends his appeal.

I learned, from watching, from the back, from the doorway: when to stand, when to sit, which way to face, how long the pause is, what your hands do. Physical technique I can acquire. I have always been able to acquire physical technique. In four days I could stand and sit and turn like a man who had been doing it since he was six.

What I could not acquire in four days was the entire literary tradition of a civilisation.

On Friday there were two hundred and forty people in that mosque, which is more people than live in Shurabad, because they come in from the salt villages and from the road. Haj Rasoul had told everyone. Of course he had told everyone. *The new sayyid is here.* Eleven days they had met that bus and now the bus had produced.

I got up onto the two wooden steps of the minbar [MEM-bar] and I looked at two hundred and forty faces and my mind went out like a lamp.

Not blank. I want to be accurate. Blank would have been survivable. What I had instead was a very loud interior voice, my own, informing me at speed that I was about to be dragged out of a mosque by two hundred men and that it would take a while.

So I did the only thing I have ever done under pressure, which is nothing, for a long time.

Eleven seconds. I have since measured eleven seconds many times, in rooms, with a watch. It is an enormous amount of time. It is a geological era.

And in the eleventh second I watched the room change, and I did not understand what I was watching, and what I was watching was two hundred and forty people deciding that the silence was on purpose.

Then I opened my mouth, and something came out of it in Arabic.

I do not speak Arabic. I want this understood at the outset because everything that follows depends on it. I had eleven years of it at school in the way that every Iranian has eleven years of it at school, which is to say I could conjugate a verb in an exam in 1996 and can now recognise perhaps nine words in a newspaper. What I had instead was rhythm. I had forty-six years of standing in the back of rooms while men in this costume made this noise. I had the cadence of it in my body the way you have a pop song from your childhood in your body — every stress, every rise, every place where the voice drops and the room says *salavat* [sa-la-VAAT] — without one single word of the content.

So I made the noise.

I put a *bismillah* [bes-mel-LAAH] on the front of it — the In-the-name-of-God that opens everything — because everything has a bismillah on the front of it. I gave it the shape: the long vowel in the third position, the little climb, the pause, the drop. I made it four clauses long because four is the number of clauses. And I ended it low, and stopped.

Then I did not translate it.

That was the entire technique. That, right there, on the first Friday, by accident, out of terror — I did not translate it. I said the noise and then I closed my mouth and looked at the middle distance with an expression of mild sorrow.

And the room filled it in.

That is the thing I have spent twenty years trying to explain to people who were not in that mosque. They were not listening to the

words. Nobody in that building was listening to the words; perhaps eleven of them could have followed the words. They were listening to the *posture*. And into eleven seconds of silence and four clauses of well-shaped nonsense, two hundred and forty people poured whatever they had brought in with them from the salt villages, and every one of them found in it exactly what he had come for, because he had put it there himself.

A man in the fourth row began to cry.

I want to tell you what that did to me and I find that I cannot, quite, even now. He was perhaps fifty. He had the cough. He was crying the way men cry in this country when they have permission, which is not quietly, and the men on either side of him put their hands on his back without looking at him, and after, in the courtyard, he came and took my hand and thanked me, thanked me, for what I had said about his brother.

I had said nothing about his brother. I did not know he had a brother. I still, to this day, do not know what happened to that man's brother.

I went back to the two rooms behind the shrine and I sat on the transparent carpet in the dark for about an hour.

And the thought I finally had — I would like to report that it was remorse. It was not remorse. It was a purely professional observation, and it arrived with the small cold click that a good lock makes, and it was this:

I have been doing this my entire life. I have simply been doing it at the wrong doors.

8.

The famous ones get checked. The obscure ones never do.

In my first week as a man of God I settled a wall, a goat, and a foreskin.

The wall was between two brothers and had been running for nine years. Both of them came to me on the Sunday, separately, each having been assured by the other's wife that I would see sense. I

listened to the first one for fifty minutes and said nothing. Then I listened to the second one for fifty minutes and said nothing. Then I asked them both to come back on Tuesday, together, and on Tuesday I let them sit in my room in silence for a long time while I poured tea very slowly, and then I said:

“Which of you built it?”

Their father had built it. In 1974. Neither of them had built it and neither of them had thought about that for nine years, and one of them made a sound like a man stepping into cold water, and it was over, and they were both extremely grateful to me, and I had contributed exactly four words.

I should say that I was, in that first week, in a condition of some moral comfort. I had never carried a weapon in my life and I had now spent seven days doing nothing but arbitrating livestock, and a man can build a great deal out of two facts like that if he lays them side by side and does not look underneath either.

The goat was more complicated, and involved a genuine question of ownership, and I will admit that I decided it by working out which of the two claimants was lying, which took under a minute, because a man lying about a goat has the same face as a man lying about a stereo, and I have spent my life in rooms with the second one.

The circumcision I would rather not discuss. I was required to be present and to say something at the correct moment, and I said something, and it was fine, and I have never been able to eat anything sweet at that kind of gathering since.

By Thursday I had understood the shape of the job and the shape of the job was this: they did not want an answer. Almost nobody in the history of the world has ever wanted an answer. They wanted someone to be *the person in the room who is not in it*, and I had been the person in the room who is not in it since I was seventeen years old, from a stairwell, waiting for a family to go to bed.

I was, I am obliged to report, extremely good at this.

And on the Thursday afternoon, at the exact moment when I had begun — God forgive me, I had actually begun — to relax, a Peugeot came up the one road with a boy in it.

He got out with two bags of books and one bag of clothes, which tells you the whole story of Mojtaba Sadeghpour [moj-ta-BAA saa-DEGH-poor] and saves us both a great deal of time.

Nineteen. Four years in Qom [GHOM]. Sent to assist the new custodian of Emamzadeh Nur for a period of six months, at the request of nobody I could identify, on a form that had three stamps on it. He had a soft new beard that had cost him a great deal of anxiety and a way of standing perfectly straight while apologising.

He kissed my hand.

He said, "It's an honour, Sayyid. I've read almost nothing. I'm here to be useful."

And I looked at this child, with his two bags of books and his sincere and terrible eagerness, and I thought, with the clarity of a man watching a truck come towards him on a narrow road:

Ah. Here is my death, and it has brought luggage.

9.

A student is a witness who has volunteered.

He got me on the fourth day.

I had been careful. I had been so careful that I had developed a small repertoire of ailments — a throat, a headache, an obligation — which allowed me to hand him things. *You lead it tonight, Mojtaba jan. It's good for them to hear a young voice.* He glowed like a stove every time. It was the easiest management I have ever done and I was still going to lose, and I knew I was going to lose, and I was simply arranging the terms.

Then on the fourth evening, after the small night gathering, with the twelve regulars gone home and the two of us stacking the cushions, he said:

"Haj Aqa. May I ask about something you said."

I said, "You may always ask about something I said."

Which is a sentence I would like to have carved into a wall somewhere.

"On Tuesday. To the widow. You said —" and he quoted me, in Arabic, my own manufacture, back at me, perfectly, having heard it once. He has a memory like a wet floor: everything that walks across it leaves a print.

"I remember."

"I've looked for it."

"Have you."

"In four places." He was not accusing. That is what I want you to understand about Mojtaba. He was not accusing me of anything, he was *worried on my behalf*, he had spent his evening hunting through his own books trying to find a citation to protect his teacher from an error, and he had failed, and it was distressing him. "I can't find it, Sayyid. And I've looked in the places where I find everything."

Now. I had prepared for this. I had, in four separate sleepless hours, prepared eleven different answers to this question, and every single one of them was an attempt to make him wrong, and every single one of them would have worked once and then set him hunting for the rest of his life.

So instead I put down the cushion, and I looked at him for a while, and I said:

"No. You wouldn't."

He waited.

I did not fill it. Eleven seconds is a geological era, and I had learned in a mosque with two hundred and forty people in it that the silence gets attributed to whoever is standing more still.

Then I said, quite gently, "Mojtaba jan. Did it help her?"

"That isn't — Sayyid, forgive me, that isn't the question —"

"It isn't the question." I agreed with him warmly. I agreed with him so warmly and so completely that I appeared to have arrived at his position some years ago and continued on past it to somewhere with a better view. "You're quite right. It isn't the question. Sit down."

He sat down.

"Did it help her?"

And he opened his mouth, and closed it, and I watched a very intelligent nineteen-year-old discover that he could not say *no* without lying, because he had been there, he had seen the woman's face, and he had gone home that night and told his mother on the telephone that his new teacher was remarkable.

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Then we'll think about it."

We. I gave him the *we*. It cost me nothing and it turned an interrogation into a project, and a project is a thing a young man will carry for you for years.

He said, "Yes, Sayyid," and he stacked the last cushion and he went to bed.

And I want to record what happened next, because it is the true beginning of everything that went wrong, and it did not happen to me.

He lay in that room for a long time in the dark, on the other side of a wall with the damp in it, and he could not work out why he felt as if he had lost. He had been right. He had been demonstrably, textually, four-sources right, and the man had not even denied it, and somehow he had come away feeling like a boy who had brought a bus timetable to a funeral and read it out.

He was nineteen. He had four years of the finest scholastic training in the country and he had never once been in a room with a professional.

I heard him get up twice.

PART TWO — THE SMOKE

Lessons Ten to Eighteen

10.

Bless the kitchen. Nobody has ever blessed the kitchen.

There is a kitchen behind every shrine in this country and it is the only part of the operation that does anything.

Ours was a long room with two burners, a bank of pots the size of drums, and a cold store that had been a stable. Out of it came the food for every mourning gathering, every wedding, every Thursday night, and every stranger who came off that road at an inconvenient hour, which was all of them. Nine hundred people in Shurabad and I would estimate that six hundred of them had, at some point in their lives, eaten something at four in the morning that Shokouh made.

Nobody had ever mentioned it. Not once. In the whole apparatus — the dome, the silver, the trustees, the men in the courtyard discussing the tiles — there was no mechanism at all for noticing the kitchen. Twenty-two years she had been in it, six of them as a widow, and the arrangement was that food arrived and men said God be praised, and God, on this evidence, was doing the cooking.

So on the second Thursday I blessed it.

I want to be clear about my motives, since I am going to be judged on them and would prefer to be judged accurately. I did not do it out of justice. I did it because I had been in that town nineteen days and I had discovered that the only person in it who did not look at my hat was on her knees in a courtyard at five in the morning insulting a floor, and I had spent my entire adult life developing precisely one skill, and I now had a costume that forbade every application of it.

I could not touch her. I could not be alone with her. I could not compliment her, or look at her for longer than a sentence, or say a single one of the eleven things that had worked on every woman I had ever met since 1997.

But I could bless her kitchen.

I did it after the evening prayer, on the way out, in front of nine people, which is the correct dosage — a blessing given in private is a proposition, a blessing given in front of nine is a policy.

I stood in the doorway of that long room with the steam on the windows and I said that there is nothing in the House of God more sacred than the room where the food for the mourners is made. I said that a man who comes to a shrine to weep and is given tea has been answered, and that the answering was done in this room, by these hands, at an hour when the rest of us were asleep and congratulating ourselves on our devotion.

Then I gave them a hadith [ha-DEETH] — a saying handed down from the Prophet, one of the hundreds of thousands of them, each with a chain of names behind it going back to somebody who was there.

It was four clauses. It concerned the Prophet, peace be upon him, and a woman who fed the mourners of Uhud [o-HOD], and it contained the phrase *she was not thanked in her lifetime, and this was noted*, and it was, on every level available to scholarship, an invention.

It is now, I am told, embroidered on a cloth in a kitchen in Kashmar.

She was standing by the second burner with a colander in her hands. She had come out of the steam when I started and she had not moved since, and by the third clause her face had gone the colour of the inside of a fig, and by the fourth she had begun to look for somewhere to put the colander and had failed to find anywhere in the world.

The nine people said *salavat*, loudly, twice.

Then they filed out into the courtyard, and I stayed in the doorway, and she said, without looking up:

“Are you finished.”

“No.”

“God give me strength.”

“There’s a second part.”

"There is not a second part."

"There's a second part about the water," I said.

"Haj Aqa." She put the colander down at last, upside down, on a wet surface, which is a thing she had not done in twenty-two years.

"Get out of my kitchen."

I went out into the courtyard where the nine of them were waiting to tell me how moved they had been.

11.

Never answer a question you understand.

Mojtaba brought a book on the Sunday.

He had been building towards it for a week the way a boy builds towards asking his father for money. I watched him carry it around the shrine for two days without opening it, and on Sunday evening he set it down on the low table between us, squared it to the edge, and turned it so that it faced me.

It was a serious book. I knew that much. It had the binding they use for the ones you are not supposed to argue with, and there was a paper marker in it, and he had written on the marker.

He said, "Sayyid. About Uhud."

And I looked at the book.

I want to describe how I looked at the book, because it is the single most useful thing I have ever learned and I am handing it over now for nothing.

I did not look at Mojtaba. I looked at the book, and I let my face do the thing a man's face does when he sees an old friend across a road — a small softening around the eyes, a very slight movement of the head — and then I reached out and put two fingers on the cover, flat, the way you put your hand on a horse.

And I said nothing.

Forty seconds.

I have measured it since. I did it deliberately and I counted, and it was forty seconds, and I have never before or since sustained

anything for forty seconds without moving. My hand on the cover. My eyes on the marker he had written. The stove ticking.

At about eighteen seconds he said, "I only meant —"

I raised my other hand very slightly off my knee, perhaps four centimetres, and put it down again.

He stopped.

At thirty-something seconds his eyes went to the door. That is the moment, if you are ever in this position, that you are waiting for: not the moment they doubt you, the moment they doubt *the room*. He had begun to feel that he had done something socially wrong. He could not have told you what. The book was a correct book. The marker was in the correct page. He had brought a legitimate scholarly instrument to a legitimate scholarly question, and somewhere in the last half-minute it had turned into a bus timetable that he was reading out loud at a funeral.

At forty I took my fingers off the cover and said:

"How is your mother?"

He said his mother was well.

"Does she know what you're doing here?"

He said his mother thought he was in Mashhad.

I let that sit for a while, because it was interesting, and because I had just discovered without asking that the boy's posting to Shurabad was not something he had told his family about, which meant that he had not chosen it, which meant that somebody had put him here. I filed it. It took me another six weeks to take the file back out.

Then I said, "Take the book with you. Read the whole chapter, not the page. Then we'll talk about Uhud."

He took the book and went out glowing, having been given homework, which to a certain kind of nineteen-year-old is the same as being kissed.

There are eleven pages in that chapter. I know because I counted them from the doorway, upside down, in the four seconds while he

was gathering himself, which is a thing you learn to do reading account books off desks.

I have never read them. I could not have read them. But I knew there were eleven, and three weeks later I said, in front of him, to somebody else, *there are eleven pages on it and not one of them settles the matter*, and I watched the boy's whole face open like a window.

12.

Grief does not want an explanation. It wants a witness with good posture.

The first funeral I did was a woman of eighty-four who had died in her sleep, which everyone kept saying to me as though it were a legal finding they wanted upheld.

I was terrified. Not of the ritual — the ritual is choreography and I had the choreography by then. I was terrified of the house afterwards. In the mosque you are protected by the format. In the house they sit you in the corner by the window and they bring you tea and then the room slowly turns towards you and waits, and there is no format, and whatever comes out of your mouth in the next thirty seconds is the thing that family repeats to each other for forty years.

So I did what my mother did.

I should explain about my mother, and I will, properly, but the short of it is this: Parvaneh [par-vaa-NEH] could not read, and had opinions on everything, and when there was a death in our building she went and sat with the family, and she did not console them. That was the thing. She did not console anybody. She sat down and she said, *Tell me about her hands*, or *Who did she like best, out of all of you, don't lie*, and then she listened for two hours and remembered every name, and came back the next day and used them.

So in that house in Shurabad, in the corner by the window, with fourteen people waiting for a sayyid to say something about the mercy of God, I said:

“Which one of you did she prefer?”

There was a silence of a quality I had not heard before.

Then the middle daughter said, “Reza,” and the room came apart — not into weeping, into *argument*, seven people at once, because it had not been Reza, it had obviously been Reza, it had been Reza only because he never visited and she liked a grievance, she had told the neighbour it was Reza to make Fatemeh jealous — and it went on for an hour and a half, and at one point a grandson was on his feet doing an impression of the old woman complaining about a saucepan, and everybody was crying, and everybody was laughing, and I sat in the corner and drank four glasses of tea and said perhaps twenty words in ninety minutes.

At the door the eldest son took both my hands and could not speak for a moment. Then he said, “Nobody has talked about her since Tuesday. They’ve all been talking *at us*.”

I went home along the wall of the shrine in the dark and I was not pleased with myself. That is the part I cannot make anybody believe. I was not pleased. I was disturbed, in a low, physical way, like a man who has picked up a familiar object and found it warm.

Because I had gone into that house intending to survive it. That was the entire plan. Survive the corner by the window, get out, twelve more days. And instead I had done my mother’s trick, which is not a trick, which is the only thing she had, and it had worked, and fourteen people were now going to sleep better.

And I could not locate the con.

That is what disturbed me. I stood in the courtyard of Emamzadeh Nur at eleven o’clock at night and went through it the way you go through a job afterwards, looking for the seam — what did I take, what did they lose, where is the mark — and there was nothing there. Nobody had been taken. The transaction was clean.

I want to be very careful here, because this is the point at which people would like me to say that something opened in me. Nothing opened in me. What happened was smaller and, I think, worse. I had spent forty-six years operating a moral system with exactly two categories, and that night, for the first time, I met an act that fitted

neither of them, and I did what any professional does with an object he cannot classify.

I put it in a drawer and did not look at it for two months.

13.

Attention is the only currency I ever counted correctly.

My father had a lock shop on a street off Nasser Khosrow, and he was the most devout crook I have ever known, and I include in that a man who used to say the traveller's prayer in the car on the way to a burglary.

He prayed five times a day for fifty-one years. He never missed the month of fasting, not once, not with pneumonia. He gave to beggars — actually gave, real money, in front of nobody, which is the test — and he cheated every single customer who ever came through his door. He sold a widow a lock in 1989 that he had bought in a job lot of four hundred, all with the same key, and he sold the other three hundred and ninety-nine in the same neighbourhood over the following decade.

I asked him about it once. I was eleven. I remember the tile I was standing on because it was cracked and I was working at it with my toe.

He looked at me with genuine bewilderment — that is the part that took me thirty years to understand, the *bewilderment*, he was not caught, he was not defensive, he simply could not locate my question — and he said:

"God asked me to pray. He did not ask me to charge fairly."

And then he went back to the bench.

He kept a ledger with God. Not on paper. In his head, and out loud, at dinner. Prayers on one side, transgressions on the other, and there were also credits available for things like being polite to his mother-in-law and not looking at the woman on the third floor. And by his own accounting, every night of his life, he was very slightly ahead.

He died ahead. I want that understood. He went out at seventy-one in profit.

My mother could not read and did not care to. She was a large loud woman who could carry a propane cylinder up four flights of stairs and did, weekly, and her name meant Butterfly, which she thought was the funniest thing that had ever happened to anyone.

Parvaneh burned esfand [es-FAND] for everything.

It is the little seed you buy in a paper cone from a child at the traffic lights. You put it on a coal and it goes off like tiny gunfire and makes a smoke that every Iranian on earth can identify blindfolded, and it turns away the evil eye. She burned it for exams and weddings, for a neighbour's new car, for my cousin's promotion, for illness, for a bad feeling on a Tuesday afternoon with no cause she could name. She burned it over me the day I started school and the day I was arrested and, I am told, the day I was born. When she thought someone had looked at me too admiringly at a wedding she would take me into the kitchen afterwards and do it over my head, going round three times, muttering, and I would stand there aged nine with my eyes shut being embarrassed.

I grew up inside that smoke. I could pick it out of a street at fifty metres.

I want you to hold onto this, because I did not. Four months I walked in and out of that shrine, and I want it on the record that I did not once — not once — think about my mother's kitchen.

And here is what she gave me, which is the only inheritance in this story.

She read rooms. She would walk into a family gathering and know inside four seconds who was pregnant, who was being cheated on, and who had lost money, and she would deliver her findings to me on the walk home like a man commentating a football match. *Did you see the sister-in-law's hands? Empty. Nothing on them. And he's still buying pistachios for the neighbours — watch that, watch it, six months.* She was right about the pistachios. She was right about everything, for forty years, in a two-room flat, with no education and no outlet and no possible use for any of it.

That is the whole of my professional training. My mother's parlour trick, applied to windows.

I married Mahnaz [mah-NAAZ] in 2003 and it lasted seven years. She knew what I did before the engagement and considered it a phase, like smoking, or communism. She was not naive. She simply had a theory about me that was more flattering than the evidence, and she held it for seven years with tremendous discipline, and when she finally put it down she did it in a single afternoon and never picked it up again, which I respected and which I have never recovered from.

We had a daughter in 2006. Golnar [gol-NAAR]. Pomegranate flower.

She was four when I left. She had a way of holding a spoon with her whole fist, like a weapon, and she narrated her food. Everything got a running commentary — *the rice is going to the corner, the rice does not want to* — and Mahnaz used to say, *God help us, she's got your mouth*, and I would laugh, because at that stage I still thought that was a good thing for a child to inherit.

That is all I am going to say about it here. It comes back. It comes back in a way I could not possibly have arranged and would not have dared to invent, and when it does I will tell it properly, and until then I would rather not.

14.

A woman who mocks you is doing you a courtesy.

Shokouh worked it out somewhere around the fifth week, and her response was to become, without warning and with terrible precision, the most pious woman in the province of Khorasan.

I understood immediately that I was being punished. What took me longer was the discovery that I could not do a single thing about it, because every weapon she used was a weapon I had put in her hand.

It began at the door of the cold store.

I had come to ask about the oil order. She was counting sacks. She turned round, saw me, and — with an expression of profound and reverent concern — took two steps backwards to a distance of about three metres, folded her hands, and looked at the floor.

“Haj Aqa.”

“Shokouh khanum.”

“Is this distance correct?” she said, to the floor. “I worry about the distance.”

“The distance is —”

“Because I would hate,” she said, “for there to be any question.”

I said the oil was fine and left.

Then it was everything. For eleven weeks. She would call across a courtyard full of people: *Haj Aqa, is it permitted to laugh on a Thursday? Only I laughed and then I thought, God forgive me, was that a Thursday.* She would knock on my open door and ask, with enormous gravity, for a ruling on whether the cat was clean. She began, in front of witnesses, referring to me exclusively as *His Excellency the Sayyid*, in full, every time, with a small inclination of the head, until two of the older women started doing it as well and I had to hear it from them, sincerely, for the next four months.

The high point, and I concede it freely, was the ankle.

We were putting up the black cloth for the mourning nights, and she was on a chair, and the hem of her skirt moved perhaps two centimetres, and she froze, and turned her head very slowly, and said, in a voice of genuine ecclesiastical anxiety, loud enough for the entire courtyard:

“Haj Aqa. My ankle showed.”

And I said something. I do not remember what. Something about the mercy of God being wide.

And she said, “You’ve gone a colour.”

Now. I would like to explain what was actually happening in that courtyard, because a man reading this would be forgiven for

thinking that a widow was tormenting a cleric, and that is the surface of it and the surface of it is a lie.

She was not tormenting a cleric. She had worked out that the cleric was not one.

Not the details — she had no route to the details, and would not have wanted them. What she had was a floor-washer's information, which is the best information in any building. She had watched me for five weeks and observed a man who did not know where anything was kept, who flinched at the word *sanad* [sa-NAD], which is the word for a deed, who had never once in five weeks corrected anybody's Arabic, and who listened — this was the tell, this was the thing that gave me away to exactly one person in nine hundred — who listened to *her*, at five in the morning, about a floor, with the full attention that men of that costume reserve for other men of that costume.

And she could not say any of that. There was no sentence available to her. A woman in Shurabad cannot walk up to the custodian of the shrine and say *I don't think you're real*.

So she did the only thing available, which was to take the costume itself and hold it up between us and shake it, over and over, in public, until we both had to look at it.

Every time she said *Haj Aqa* with that little full stop after it, she was saying: *I can see the man in there. I am not going to tell anyone. Get out.*

And I answered every one of them, and I answered them all wrong, on purpose, because I am a coward and it was the closest I had come to being spoken to in nine years.

I said: *Yes. And I'm staying.*

15.

Never be alone with what you want. Institute a committee.

The Thursday night recitation for the women of Shurabad was instituted in the eighth week and ran, I am told, for another nine years after I was gone.

I would like it recorded in the minutes that it was a considerable success. Attendance began at nine and stabilised at thirty-odd. Two women learned to read in it. A dispute between two families that had survived a wedding, a funeral and a court was settled in the third month by two grandmothers who found themselves seated on the same rug and could not, in that room, sustain it.

It was instituted so that I could be in a room with Shokouh Aramesh for forty minutes a week without committing a sin.

I want to walk through the engineering, because I am proud of it in the way a man is proud of a thing he should be ashamed of and has done extremely well.

I could not visit her. I could not walk with her. I could not send her anything, or receive anything, or say her name in a sentence with mine in it. In the entire architecture of that town there was no legal channel by which the custodian of the shrine and the woman who ran its kitchen could sit in the same room for any length of time without a reason.

So I built a reason. Thursday night, in the women's hall, a recitation and a short talk, open to all, tea afterwards — and the tea, obviously, from the kitchen, which meant the kitchen had to be represented, which meant Shokouh had to be in the room, which meant that for forty minutes every week I could look at the far wall and talk, and she would be somewhere to the left of it, and afterwards there would be a general noise of thirty women in which two people could exchange four sentences about crockery.

Four sentences. That was the yield. I built an institution for four sentences a week about crockery.

And here is the part that finished me, which I did not see coming and could not have priced.

I was good at it.

I do not mean the theology. There was no theology. I mean that thirty women came into a hall on a Thursday night and for the first time in the history of that shrine somebody stood in front of them and did not talk to them the way you talk to a school assembly. I asked things. My mother's things. *Who did you learn it from — no,*

who actually, not who you're supposed to say. And they told me, and I remembered, and the next week I used their mothers' names, and by the fifth week there were thirty-two of them and a woman was coming in from a salt village nine kilometres out on the back of her son's motorcycle.

Shokouh sat at the back with the samovar and said nothing for eleven weeks.

Then in the twelfth, in the general noise, drying a glass, not looking at me, she said:

"You did that for me."

I said, "I did it for the crockery."

"Thirty-two women," she said. "You built a school for thirty-two women because you wanted to talk to me about a teapot."

"That is a very serious accusation."

"It is."

"You should take it to the trustee."

"Haj Aqa," she said, and put the glass down, and I have never in my life heard a full stop like it. "Do you know what the worst part is?"

I did not.

"It worked," she said. "For them. It actually worked for them."

And she picked up the samovar and carried it out, and I stood in an empty hall in the province of Khorasan holding a wet cloth, entirely alone, in the exact condition of a man who has been convicted of something and given a prize for it in the same sentence.

16.

*Every priesthood is a trade with a uniform. That is not the scandal.
That is the mercy.*

In the third month I was summoned to Kashmar [kash-MAR] for two days of provincial meetings, and I went with my heart in my mouth expecting to be exposed by lunchtime on the first day, and instead I was very nearly bored to death.

There were about forty of us in a hall with a broken air conditioner. Here is what we discussed:

Stipend tiers. For four hours. There are grades, and the grades attach to your posting and your years and the size of the town, and the difference between the third and the fourth is enough to matter if you have a daughter getting married, and about eleven men had a daughter getting married, and they had the figures memorised the way men in my trade memorise the response time of a district.

Then: the housing allowance and whether the shrine house counts against it. Then: a very long dispute about a form.

I sat at the back and did the only thing I know how to do, which is watch.

They were civil servants.

I want to say this carefully because it is the closest thing to a discovery that I made in that entire year, and everyone I have ever told it to has heard the opposite of what I said.

I had come in expecting a conspiracy. I am a criminal; I understand conspiracies; I would have known exactly what to do inside one. And what I found in that hall was forty men in their fifties with bad backs, on a wage that would not embarrass a bus inspector, arguing about a form.

There was a man from a village east of us who had washed corpses for thirty-one years. He had a routine about it. He did it at the tea break with four of us leaning on a wall and it was, I am not exaggerating, better material than most of what you will hear from professionals — the ones who float, and why, and what the families say, and a passage about a man who had been a very great bully in life and required, in death, four people to hold him down. He did that bit twice because we asked him to. He was funny the way a surgeon is funny.

And then somebody asked after his wife and he said she had been gone two years and he was managing, and everybody looked at their tea.

There was a man of about sixty who told me, unprompted, in a corridor, in the flattest voice imaginable, that he had not believed in any of it for twenty years. He said it the way you would mention a knee. I said — and it came out before I could route it — *then why?* And he said that there were eleven hundred people in his district and somebody had to bury their mothers properly, and if he went, they would send a boy from Qom who would do it correctly and coldly, and he was not prepared to hand those families over to a boy from Qom.

Then he asked me if I had any tobacco.

There were careerists. Obviously there were careerists. Three or four of them, smooth, in good cloth, with the Qom accent laid over something else, and my whole skin went up when they came into the room, because I have spent my life in rooms with crews and I know a crew when I see one at a distance of forty metres. They were doing something. I never found out what. It had nothing to do with God and everything to do with a cement plant.

And there were two men in that hall — I will not name them, one is still alive — of such plain and unadvertised decency that I found it physically difficult to stand near them. One of them helped me with a form for eleven minutes. He had no idea who I was and he will never know and he was simply a man who could see that somebody was struggling with a form.

I came out of Kashmar with something worse than the conspiracy I had gone in expecting.

Because if it had been a conspiracy, I could have despised it and gone on wearing the coat with a clear conscience. Instead it was a profession — a badly paid, badly run, mostly sincere profession with rot running through the middle of it, and the decent men *knew* about the rot, and knew about the cement, and they stayed anyway, because leaving would hand eleven hundred families to somebody worse.

I sat on the bus back to Shurabad and worked out, somewhere around the salt flat, that I had spent two days among men who had made exactly my decision.

The difference between us was a piece of paper and thirteen centuries.

I have thought about this more than is healthy. The conclusion I reached that night is the one I still hold, and it is not the comfortable one and it is not the cynical one either, which is why nobody likes it:

Every priesthood on earth is a trade with a uniform. So is every court, and every hospital, and every police force. The uniform is not a fraud perpetrated on the public — the uniform is a device that allows an ordinary man with a bad back to walk into the worst hour of a stranger's life and be *useful* there, which no ordinary man can do on his own authority, because on his own authority nobody would let him in the door.

The uniform is the mercy. It is also the crime. It is the same object.

I was, at that point, the only man in the province wearing one that fitted.

17.

The tray.

There was a tray.

It was Thursday, late, in the passage outside the women's hall, and the tray was on the low shelf where it always was, and we both reached for it at the same time.

Her hand was on the left handle. Mine was on the right.

Nothing happened.

We stood there, either side of a brass tray with eleven glasses on it, in a passage with a bulb that had been going for a month, and nothing happened for a period of time I am not able to state accurately because I stopped counting, which I have never otherwise done in my life.

I could hear the samovar in the hall behind her. I could hear a woman laughing at something. I could hear, very distinctly, the noise the salt makes in the walls at night, which is a thing you stop hearing after a week and which I heard then.

She did not look up and I did not look down.

Her thumb was on the brass. There was a burn scar across the base of it, old, from a pan, and I had known about that scar for eleven weeks and had never once been in a position to look at it.

Then she said, "Let go."

And I let go.

And she picked up the tray with both hands and carried it into the hall, and I stood in the passage for a while longer, and then I went and prayed the night prayer with two hundred people and did not remember one second of it.

18.

If God speaks to you, be polite. If He does not, be quicker.

Now I have to tell you about the chamber, and I would rather not, and I have never done it well.

Underneath the blue dome of Emamzadeh Nur there is an inner room. It is not large — four paces by five — and it is old, much older than the dome, low enough that a tall man must attend to his head. The grave is in the middle under a lattice of wood and silver. The walls are stone and there is one door and there is no window.

There was a vent. High on the north wall. It was bricked up in 1961, and I noticed the brick in my second week, and thought nothing of it, because a man notices bricks the way a butcher notices a limp.

Three nights a year, in the mourning season, the chamber is opened for the vigil. People come off the road from four provinces. They arrive having fasted since dawn, most of them having travelled overnight on a bus, many of them for a specific reason — a sick child, a court case, a father — and they sit in that room in the dark from the night prayer until first light.

And the braziers are lit.

Esfand. Sacks of it. Not a pinch on a coal in a kitchen doorway — sacks, in four braziers, replenished by two men in rotation, for

eight hours, in a stone room four paces by five with one door and no vent.

I had been in that room during the day. I had not been in it during the vigil.

Haj Rasoul took me in himself at ten o'clock at night on the second night, with his hand under my elbow, and he said, "You'll want to sit at the north wall, Sayyid. Under the brick. It's easier there."

I have gone over that sentence for twenty years.

There were perhaps sixty people in the chamber. The smoke was not a haze. I want to be exact, because everyone who has not been in that room imagines a haze, and it was not a haze, it was a *substance* — you could see the shape of your own breath going into it and not coming back. The heat off four braziers in a stone box. And the sound, which I had not anticipated at all: sixty people in the dark, none of them speaking, breathing.

The first two hours were nothing. That is important. Nothing happened for two hours except that I became aware of my own eyelids.

Then the walls began to move, and I would like to describe this precisely, because it was not that they appeared to move. I have had a fever. That is not what this was. The stone breathed in and out, slowly and with enormous patience, and the correct thing to say about it was not *the wall seems to be moving* but *the wall has always been doing this and you have simply never been quiet enough to notice*, and I understood, sitting there, that I had been wrong about the nature of stone for forty-six years and had now been corrected.

Then time came apart.

Not sped up. Not slowed. Came apart — into pieces that did not have to be in order, so that a thing that had happened in 1991 was available in the room, adjacent to me, and I could go and look at it. I went and looked at several. I went and looked at my father's bench. I went and looked at a stairwell in Karaj.

And the geometry started, which I cannot do anything with in words. Behind my eyes and also on the wall, which were the same place. Patterns, moving, endlessly generating and folding, and none of it random — that was the thing about it, the offensive thing, it was so obviously *designed* that the design felt like an argument being made to me personally by somebody with a great deal more time than I had.

Around the fourth hour I understood that I was not alone in the room, and I do not mean the sixty people.

There was an attention on me.

I have been watched by police. I know what being watched feels like from every angle and every distance and I am telling you that this was not that and it was not imagination either, and if you want to say it was chemistry then I agree with you completely and it does not help me at all, because I was there and the chemistry was extremely specific about who it was.

It knew me.

And it addressed me — not in a voice, there was no voice, there was a fact that arrived the way a fact arrives when you remember your own telephone number — and what arrived was:

Panjshanbeh.

Nobody in Shurabad knew that name. Nobody within four hundred kilometres of that room knew that name. It had been said out loud perhaps two hundred times in a prison block by men who were now dead or elsewhere, and it arrived in that chamber like a bill.

And my mouth — because I have exactly one register under pressure, and it is not awe —

I said, out loud, in a stone room with sixty mourners in it:

“Oh, don’t.”

Somebody near me shifted.

You have been brought back, said the fact.

“Back.”

You were here.

"I have never been here in my life," I said, out loud, to a wall, "I have never been east of Mashhad, and if You're going to do this at least do it to somebody who deserves it, because I am extremely busy —"

She stood where you are sitting.

And the geometry did something then that I will not attempt, and I saw a queue. A queue of women, along a wall, in daylight, in clothes from before I was born, and it was not a vision in the sense that I saw it, it was more that I was informed of it with total authority, and one of them was near the front, and she was young, and she was large and loud and she was carrying something, and I knew her, and I have never been able to decide since whether I recognised her face or was simply told to.

I said, "That's not fair."

And the fact did not answer, because it had said what it had, and it went, and the room came back a piece at a time over about ninety minutes, and at some point in there I was crying, in the dark, in a black turban, in a room full of people who were all doing the same thing and none of whom found it remarkable.

At first light two men carried the braziers out and opened the door and the cold came in like water.

Haj Rasoul was in the courtyard with a glass of tea for me, standing exactly where he had been standing eight hours earlier, looking extremely well rested.

He said, "It's something, isn't it."

I said it was something.

"Every year," he said, "every year I think, this year I'll be ready for it." He laughed, the door-in-a-draught laugh. "You're pale, Sayyid. Sit. Sit. Drink that."

I sat on the step and drank the tea, and my hands were not steady, and I thought — and this is the last coherent thought I had before I slept for eleven hours — *I have to find out what my mother was doing in this town.*

Which is when a girl came in through the gate off the morning bus, with a plastic folder under her arm, and asked the man sweeping the courtyard whether this was where the sayyid was who signs things.

PART THREE — THE LEDGER

Lessons Nineteen to Twenty-Seven

19.

Nobody looks at a cleric's face.

I slept eleven hours and came out into the courtyard at four in the afternoon with my head full of wool, and Mojtaba said there was a girl waiting who had been waiting since morning and had refused three separate offers of food.

"From where?"

"Tehran, Sayyid. She came on the morning bus. She has a folder."

They all have a folder. I had learned by then that the folder is the whole personality of the visit — a thin folder is a man who wants a favour, a fat folder is a man who has been to eleven offices and has stopped believing in any of them.

She was in the courtyard by the tap, on the low wall, with a plastic document wallet on her knees, and she stood up when I came out of the passage, and the first thing I registered was that she stood up wrong. Everyone in Shurabad stands up for the coat in a particular way — hands, eyes down, a half-bow that continues for a moment after it should stop. She stood up the way you stand up for a doctor who is running late.

Tehran. Obviously Tehran. Cheap coat, good shoes, a face that had been in eleven waiting rooms in five weeks and had run entirely out of the resource that makes people polite in waiting rooms.

She was perhaps nineteen.

She said, "Are you the one who signs things?"

And I said something. I have no idea what.

Then Mojtaba, at my shoulder, doing his job beautifully, said, "The lady's name is —"

And she said it herself, over him, flatly, in the way of a person who has said it at eleven counters and has learned to get it in first:

"Golnar Fani."

I want to tell you what I did, and it is nothing, and it is the finest professional performance of my life.

I have sat in stairwells for four hours. I once stood in a stranger's hallway for ninety seconds while the owner searched the room I had just come out of. I have a body that does not report to me under pressure and I have always been grateful for it in the way you are grateful for a good tenant.

I said, "Come in out of the sun."

That is all. There is nothing else in the record. My face did not move, my hands did not move, my voice did the slow thing it does. Mojtaba, who watched me every hour of every day for nine months and who noticed everything, noticed nothing.

We went into the office, which is a room with a desk and two chairs and a picture of a martyr from a town nearby, and she sat down and put the folder on the desk and squared it, and I sat down opposite my daughter for the first time in fifteen years.

She did not know me.

I want to be very careful about this, because it is the exact place where everything I had been saying about my hat stopped being a joke.

I was thirty-one when she last saw me properly. I was clean-shaven, and thin, and I wore reading glasses I did not need, and I smelt of cigarettes and a cologne she would probably still recognise on a stranger in a lift. I am forty-six now. I have a beard that took nine months. I had lost eleven kilos in Vakilabad and put six back on Shokouh's rice.

But that is not why she did not know me. Let us not pretend. A daughter knows her father across a road at forty metres in the dark; there are people in this country who have identified a man from the back of his neck after twenty years.

She did not know me because I was wearing a black turban, and *nobody looks at a cleric's face*.

You look at the hat. Then you look at your own hands, because you are about to ask for something, and because you were taught at seven that it is not correct to look. In nine months in Shurabad I had been looked at, properly, in the face, by three people: Shokouh

Aramesh, Mojtaba Sadeghpour, and a four-year-old at a wedding who was subsequently removed.

I had spent my entire adult life becoming invisible by putting on reading glasses.

And I had finally achieved it by putting on the one object in the country that every single person in the room is guaranteed to be looking at.

20.

A document is a wall with a door in it, and the door is a person.

Here is what she wanted.

She was getting married. To do that, a woman in this country needs her father's permission, and her father was unavailable, and had been unavailable for six years in a way that was not legally the same as being dead. Her mother's position — delivered, I could hear it in the way Golnar reported it, in the tone you use about an earring that went down a drain — was that he was probably dead. The court's position was that *probably* is not a document.

So she needed the court to declare him absent. To get that she needed a file, and the file needed things in it — dates, the last known address, a statement of the efforts made — and the clerk at the court in Tehran had looked at her file five weeks ago and told her it was thin.

She had then been to eleven offices.

And somewhere in the eleventh, a woman in a queue had told her about a place out past Kashmar where the sayyid signs things.

That is the sentence. That is how my daughter came to be sitting across a desk from me.

Not a miracle. Not the hand of God, though I am obliged to concede that if the hand of God were involved it would have arranged it exactly this way, being a great enthusiast for the ironic route. She came because Haj Rasoul Sarmadi had spent four decades cultivating a reputation for our shrine — *they'll help you there, they don't ask, they don't charge* — and he had cultivated it deliberately,

because a shrine that solves paperwork is a shrine that people come to, and people who come to a shrine leave something in the tin.

The corruption of the institution delivered my daughter to my door. There is no other mechanism in the story. It was not repentance that brought her and it was not grace. It was the pilgrim trade.

“What do you actually need from me?”

“A statement,” she said. “That I came here. That I asked. That I’m not — ” she looked for the word and did not find a polite one — “that I’m not doing this to get rid of him.”

“And are you?”

She looked up.

That was the first time she looked at my face, and it lasted about a second, and I did not enjoy it.

“No,” she said. “I’d like him to turn up at the wedding and be humiliated. But I can’t put that on a form.”

I said, “No. Most of the true things don’t go on the form.”

And she laughed — one syllable, out of the nose, entirely without pleasure, exactly the way I laugh — and said, “Are you going to be like this the whole time?”

21.

When you cannot say no, say yes at a length nobody can survive.

I could not sign it.

Every route out of that room ended with her leaving Shurabad on the evening bus, and I had eleven minutes to build something that would keep her in it.

Consider my position. If I signed the thing that afternoon she would take it, thank me, catch the six o’clock, and I would have had my daughter in a room for ninety minutes at the age of nineteen and would then have gone back to blessing kitchens.

So I invented a procedure.

I said that in a matter of this kind — the declaration of absence of a living man, which is not a small thing, which touches the standing of a family — the shrine could not simply issue a paper. There was a form to it. There was a period.

“A period.”

“Forty days,” I said, “is customary.”

She said, “Forty days?”

“Forty is the customary number.”

Now, this is true. Forty is the customary number in this country for absolutely everything. Forty days of mourning, forty days of chelleh [chel-LEH] in the winter, forty days of anything a man wishes to make sound both ancient and non-negotiable. It is the great load-bearing integer of Persian life and I want to say publicly that I have never in my life encountered a smoother instrument. Say *forty* to an Iranian and some part of him lies down.

She said, “I’ve got a wedding in Ordibehesht [or-dee-beh-HESHT].”

“Then we shall write to the court,” I said, “and inform them that the matter is under examination at the shrine, which will hold your file open, and the clerk will have something to put in his hand, which is what a clerk is for.”

She looked at me for a long moment.

“You know what a clerk is for,” she said.

“I have been to offices.”

“Sayyids don’t usually know what a clerk is for.”

I said, in the slow voice, “I was not always this.”

Which is the single most honest sentence I spoke in nine months, and she took it as modesty about a seminary education, and thanked me for it.

The forty days had a rider, which I produced at the door, as an afterthought, because everything important is produced at the door as an afterthought.

"You'll need to come back at the end of it," I said. "In person. Once. It cannot be posted. The declaration has to be witnessed at the shrine."

None of this exists. I want to be absolutely clear, for the record and for the boy this is written for: none of it exists, not one clause, not the forty days, not the witnessing, not the letter to the court. I made an entire canonical procedure out of the air in a room in Shurabad at half past four in the afternoon, and I did it to buy six weeks.

It is still in use.

I heard about it four years later, in a completely different province, from a man who described it to me in some detail, with a small correction to my version which he said was the older and more correct form.

22.

Let them do the material. Nod at the punchlines.

She stayed four days on that first visit, in the women's guest room behind the kitchen, because the evening bus does not exist on a Wednesday and because Shokouh took one look at her and made a decision.

And on the second evening, in the office, with the tea going cold, my daughter did nine minutes on me.

I need to explain that she had a routine. Not a grievance — a *routine*, worked up over years, with a running order and callbacks, the kind of thing you develop when you are fourteen and discover that if you get to the subject before anybody else does you control the entire room. She had performed it at parties. You could hear the polish on it.

It opened with the reading glasses.

"He didn't need them," she said. "My mother told me. Twenty-something years, glasses, perfect eyesight. He thought they made him look like a man with an appointment." A beat. She had a

beat. "He was a burglar. He'd put on glasses to go and rob a flat. In case somebody thought he wasn't serious."

I said, "Ah."

"So that's the level."

"Mm."

Then she did the Thursdays. She did the Thursdays for two full minutes — the working week of a man who only committed crimes on a Thursday, out of respect for the weekend, and who declined to work Fridays out of consideration for a God he did not believe in, *in case it was rude*. She had a whole passage about him having a better work-life balance than her mother's second husband.

I made a small sympathetic noise.

Then the knocking, which she did not know was true and which is the only part of the whole nine minutes I would have disputed. Then the arrest, which she did briskly, because the arrest is not funny and she knew it — except for one line, which she delivered flat, into the glass, and which went through me like a nail: "He never carried a weapon. That's the thing. That's what he'd want on the stone. *He never carried a weapon.*" Then the years of the postcards, which I had not known about and which she attributed to me and which must have been my mother, and I sat there and let a woman thank my mother's ghost by mocking me.

And the closer — she landed it, she really did land it — was the photograph.

"He kept a photograph of me," she said. "That's the story. That's what my aunt tells everybody, this big tragic thing, *he carries her photograph.*" She turned her glass around on the desk. "I was four in it. Four. He's had fifteen years to get an updated one. There's a photograph of me on my mother's cousin's Instagram that eleven thousand people have seen." A beat. "He could have looked at that. It's free."

Nine minutes. Callbacks in it. Genuinely, professionally funny.

And I sat opposite her in a black turban with my hands folded and I nodded gravely, and made the small sympathetic noise at the

punchlines, and once, when she got to the glasses, I said, “Ah — the poor man,” and she said, “*Poor* man,” and did another thirty seconds she had clearly not planned, which were the best thirty seconds of the whole thing.

At one point I laughed.

Out loud, properly, at a joke my daughter made about me, in front of her, and she was delighted, because nobody had ever laughed at the material in a shrine before, and she said, “Sorry, Haj Aqa, I shouldn’t —” and I said, “No. No. It’s very good.”

It was very good. That is the part I have never been able to explain to anybody. It was *very good*. She had my mouth, exactly as Mahnaz predicted, and she had taken the single worst thing that ever happened to her and made nine tight minutes out of it, and my professional assessment — I am not able to give you any other kind — was that she had done a better job with the material than I had.

Then the tea was finished and she said, “God, I’m sorry. You must get this all day.”

“I do.”

“Do you ever want to just tell people to grow up?”

And I said, “Every hour.”

23.

If you must invent scripture, invent it against yourself.

On the fourth morning, an hour before the bus, she stopped performing.

It happened at the tap in the courtyard, without preamble, the way the real ones always do — she was rinsing a glass and she said, to the wall:

“Can I ask you something as a — ” she made a small gesture at my hat — “as that.”

“Yes.”

“Am I allowed to hate him?”

I said nothing, which by then was not a technique.

"Because everybody has an opinion," she said. "Everybody. My mother says forget him, my aunt says he's still your father, the man I'm marrying says it's not healthy — they've all got a *position*." She put the glass down. "And they all want me to arrive somewhere. Forgive him, or get past it, or use it, or write him a letter I don't send. There's always a destination."

"And you don't want to go anywhere."

"I want to know if I'm *permitted*." She looked up, and this time it was not a second, it was much longer, and she was looking straight into my face and finding a cleric in it. "Not whether it's good for me. Whether it's allowed. Because if it's allowed then I can just — hate him. Quietly. Forever. And go and have a life. And nobody has to say anything else about it."

Now.

I had eleven months of practice by that point and I could produce four clauses of Arabic in the time it takes most men to clear their throat. I had a stock. I had, God help me, favourites.

And I stood in that courtyard and I understood with total clarity that if I gave her stock, she would take it, and it would be the answer she carried for the rest of her life, and it would be worth nothing, and I would have robbed her in a way that would have made my father blink.

So I took a long time.

I sat down on the low wall by the tap and I put my hands on my knees and I said, "Sit down."

And then I made it. Right there. In front of her, out of nothing, the way I had made everything else in that town, except that this one I made slowly and I made it *well*, and I have never worked harder on anything in my life, before or since, than I worked on four clauses of counterfeit Arabic in a courtyard in Shurabad in the eleven minutes before a bus.

I said it first. The whole thing, low, in the cadence, four clauses, the long vowel in the third position.

Then — and I had never done this, not once in nine months — I translated it.

I said: *The hatred of the wronged is not a debt they owe. It is a wall the wrongdoer built, and it stands on his ground, and he pays the rent on it. She is not required to pull it down. She is required only to build her house somewhere else, and not against it.*

She did not say anything for a while.

Then she said, “Is that real?”

And I said, “It’s older than both of us.”

Which was, at that moment, the largest lie I had told in my entire life, and also — I have thought about this for twenty years and I still hold it — the only true thing I ever said in that costume, because the sentence was correct. It is correct. I have tested it against everything since and it holds.

She got out her telephone and asked me to say it again so she could write it down, and I said it again, slowly, and she wrote it in Persian in the notes application with her thumbs, and asked me twice about a word.

And then she got on the bus.

And I stood in the courtyard of Emamzadeh Nur at ten past nine in the morning having invented a verse of scripture which gave my daughter formal religious permission to hate me for the rest of her life, and having watched her receive it with enormous relief and thank me for it, and having watched her thumbs.

I went inside and sat down and I did not move for about an hour.

Shokouh came in at some point and looked at me and went out again and did not ask, and that was the first indication I had that I was in serious trouble.

24.

A woman who can measure you by eye has already done it.

My abaya went at the shoulder in the eleventh month, which is what happens to a garment worn every day by a man who has never once had to take care of a garment.

Shokouh announced that she would make another. She announced it to the kitchen, at volume, in the third person — *His Excellency the Sayyid will not be doing the rounds in Kashmar looking like a scarecrow* — and I said that this was not necessary, and everybody in the kitchen laughed at me.

Measuring a man you cannot touch is a technical problem and she solved it in the courtyard on a Tuesday in front of four witnesses, which is the correct dosage.

She stood four feet away with a notebook and she looked at me.

“Turn.”

I turned.

“Not like that. Slowly. Like the world’s slowest — yes. There.”

Four witnesses. Two of them were the older women who had started calling me His Excellency in earnest. One was Mojtaba, who was holding the notebook and had been told to write down numbers he did not understand and was doing it with tremendous seriousness.

She narrated. That was the method. She walked around me at a distance of four feet, entirely legal, entirely proper, not once within a metre, and she said the numbers out loud for the boy to write down, and the numbers were the least of it.

“Shoulder to floor — one forty-eight. He’s got one shoulder lower than the other. Write that. The left. It’s from carrying something for years, that. Sleeve — write sixty-two, and then write sixty-one, because he does this with his wrists.” She did it. She did an impression of my hands. It was accurate. “Chest, he’s lost weight this month, don’t argue, I know what goes back to the kitchen. Neck — ” a pause of exactly the wrong length — “the neck’s fine.”

I stood in the middle of a courtyard in the province of Khorasan and was read out loud to four people for six minutes.

I have been in a courtroom. I have stood while a judge in Mashhad went through my life at some length and gave me twelve years. I was more comfortable in that room than I was in that courtyard, and the difference is that the judge did not know about my wrists.

At the end she shut the notebook and said, "Well. He's not a difficult shape."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment. Difficult shapes are interesting."

And the four witnesses laughed and went off to tell everybody, and the story got around Shurabad within a day as further evidence of the delightful informality of the new sayyid, who lets the kitchen speak to him like that, God bless him, he's not proud.

Here is what I did not see until much later, and it happened during the ankle-length silence.

Golnar had been gone eight days.

And while Shokouh was doing the thing with the wrists, one of the older women said — as a pleasantry, filler, the sort of noise you make in a courtyard — "That girl who came, was she any relation? She had your way of turning her head."

And I said, "No. No relation."

And I said it correctly. My voice did the slow thing. My hands did nothing. It was, again, a flawless piece of work.

And Shokouh Aramesh, who was four feet away with a notebook and who had spent eleven months in a room with me, did not look up, and wrote something down, and went to the kitchen.

I found out much later that what she wrote down was 61.

She had already written 61.

25.

A shrine is a business with a saint on the letterhead. Read the books.

The ledgers of Emamzadeh Nur went back to 1938 and were kept in a cupboard in the office, and in the eleventh month I read them, all of them, over nine nights, because I was avoiding thinking about my daughter and because a man's vices come back to him under stress.

I read them the way I used to read account books off a desk in the dark: not for the numbers, for the *shape*.

Here is the shape.

The shrine takes in more money than a shrine of that size, in a town of nine hundred at the end of a road, has any business taking in. Not a fortune. Nobody was building anything. But the pilgrim volume was wrong — three nights a year in the mourning season the town takes in four provinces' worth of people, and the tin fills, and the tin has filled, in the same pattern, since before the war with Iraq.

And the reputation was doing it. *Emamzadeh Nur, out past Kashmar. People see things there.* Not a rumour the trustees denied. Not a rumour they advertised either, which is much more expensive and much more effective.

Second thing. The trustee family. Sarmadi, four generations, uninterrupted since 1911. That is not unusual in itself.

Third thing, and this is where I stopped being a man passing an evening.

The register of custodians.

The custodian is not the trustee. The trustee is local and hereditary and runs the money. The custodian is the cleric, sent in, appointed, the man in the coat. And in that register, going back to 1938, there were nineteen of them.

Nineteen custodians in eighty-seven years. The longest served nine years. The average was closer to four. And every one of them left in the same three ways: *transferred, returned to Qom*, or a blank.

Nobody stays. That was the shape. Nobody stays in Shurabad, and everybody in Shurabad stays forever.

I went back to the entry for my predecessor.

Sayyid Hadi Vahedi [saa-YED HAA-dee vaa-heh-DEE]. Appointed the previous spring. And beside his name, in the column, in Haj Rasoul's handwriting: *transferred, Mashhad*.

Dated four weeks before I got off the bus.

Now. I had lived eleven days of somebody else's mail by then and I had never once asked a question about the man whose coat I was wearing, because it had not been in my interest to, and because there is a discipline to this and the discipline is *do not look under the thing you are standing on*.

But I had been in a hospital in Mashhad. I had seen him. He was on a gurney in a pre-operative bay with his hands arranged on his chest by somebody who had cared enough to arrange them, and he was sixty-five, and he was dead, and the date on the transfer was four weeks before.

A man does not get transferred to Mashhad and then die in a hospital there four weeks later with his post still being met at a bus stop for eleven consecutive nights.

Unless the transfer is the paperwork you write afterwards.

I sat in that office at two o'clock in the morning with the ledger open and I did the thing I have done all my life, which is not panic, which is inventory. And the inventory came out like this:

The vacancy I walked into was not a vacancy. It was made.

And the eleven nights of meeting the bus were not eleven nights of hope. They were eleven nights of *waiting to see what would arrive*, and what arrived was a burglar in a dead man's coat who could not read Arabic, and the old man in the square had taken my hand in both of his and said *thank God*, and he had meant it, and I had thought at the time that he meant it about me.

I closed the ledger. I put it back in the cupboard, third from the left, spine out, the way I had found it.

Then I went and stood in the courtyard for a while and looked at the dome, and thought about the fact that I had been shown the cash tin on my first night by a man who was counting it.

He had not been testing whether I would steal.

He had been testing whether I was a professional.

26.

I have entered the tradition. I have contributed.

I heard my own hadith in Bardaskan [bar-das-KAAN].

It was a wedding I had no business at, four hours away, and I was in a room of about sixty men, and a cleric I had never met — decent, tired, sixty, one of the corridor men, a man with a knee — stood up to say the words over the food.

And he said mine.

The Uhud one. The woman who fed the mourners. *She was not thanked in her lifetime, and this was noted.*

Word perfect. Better than word perfect — he had improved the third clause. He had done something to the rhythm of it that I had not been good enough to do, and it landed harder, and sixty men said *salavat*.

I sat on the floor with a plate on my knee and I want to describe what I felt, because I have never seen it described and I am not sure it has a name.

It was not guilt, and it was not triumph.

It was the exact sensation of watching a lock you cut open being sold in a shop as new.

Afterwards I found him by the door and I said, in a light voice, that it was a beautiful thing he had used, and where was it from.

And he said, with the absolute confidence of a man who has been doing this for thirty years, that it was well known, and that he had it from a teacher in Neyshabur [ney-shaa-BOOR], and that there was some dispute about the chain but the meaning was sound.

Some dispute about the chain but the meaning was sound.

I had made it up eleven months earlier standing in a doorway looking at a woman holding a colander.

I went out into the yard and stood by a wall. There were fairy lights in a tree and a generator going, and I stood there in my new abaya with my lower shoulder and I did the arithmetic.

Eleven months. Perhaps forty inventions, of which maybe nine had legs. A shrine that takes four provinces three nights a year. Men from those four provinces going home and using what they heard.

I was in the water supply.

And then the thought that has kept me up more nights than the dead man, the ledger, and the girl combined:

Are mine working better?

Because they were. I want to be careful. I am not saying they were better — I have no standing to say anything about better, I cannot read four words in a row. I am saying that mine were *landing*, in rooms, with people, more reliably than the material they came in with. And I knew exactly why, and the reason is humiliating and simple: I made mine in response to a specific person in a specific room with a specific injury, at the moment of the injury, with no obligation to be true.

The real ones had to survive thirteen centuries and four schools of law and a war. Mine had to get one woman through a Tuesday.

Of course mine landed.

So which of these two facts is the scandal? That a thief was manufacturing scripture in the province of Khorasan and it was going into the water? Or that it *fitted*, that it went in without a ripple, that a tradition thirteen centuries deep took a fake from a man in the wrong shoes and improved the rhythm of it and passed it on with a note about the chain?

I have an answer. It is the wrong answer and I have never been able to get rid of it: neither.

Neither is the scandal. The scandal is that this is *how it has always worked*, that every one of those thirteen centuries was made of men in rooms with people who were suffering, saying the thing that

would land, and the ones that landed got carried, and after enough carrying nobody can tell any more, and — here is the part I cannot put down — *it does not matter*, because the woman in the kitchen in Kashmar with the cloth on the wall is not being lied to. She is being told that her work was noticed. Which is true. Which was always true, and which nobody had said out loud for twenty-two years because there was no mechanism.

I made a mechanism.

I made it for a bad reason, out of nothing, to impress a widow.

I got back into the car and told the driver it had been a lovely wedding.

27.

A student who cannot convict you will acquit the whole world instead.

Mojtaba came to me in the twelfth month with fourteen pages.

He had been quiet for a fortnight — not sullen, *working*, the lamp on in his room until two, and I had assumed with a kind of resigned calm that he was building the case. Fourteen pages is a case. I had been ready for it since the fourth day.

He put them on the low table and squared them to the edge and turned them to face me, exactly as he had turned the book, eleven months earlier, and I felt something in my chest that was almost affection for the both of us.

And then he did not accuse me of anything.

What he had written was an argument.

I want to state what was in it as accurately as I can, because he was nineteen and because it was better than anything I could have built, and because it destroyed his life.

He began from the observed facts, which he set out without comment, and which were: that in eleven months he had been unable to verify a single citation of mine in any of the four collections available to him; that he had written to a friend in Qom on a pretext and received back nothing; that certain of my chains

were not merely unattested but structurally impossible, involving men who were dead before other men were born, and he gave two examples, both correct, both mine, and I had to look at the ceiling.

He then set out the second column of facts. The rate of resolution of disputes in Shurabad, which he had counted. The attendance of the women's Thursday. Two names — I will not write them — of people in that town who had been in a bad way and were not now. He had counted things. Nobody had asked him to count anything.

And then, on page nine, he asked his question, and his question was not *is my teacher a fraud*.

His question was: *what is the text for?*

He proposed — carefully, with a great deal of *it may be that I am mistaken* — that a chain of transmission is not the thing itself. That it is a device for carrying the thing across time, and that the thing being carried is the answering of a person in front of you. And that a man who can answer the person in front of him without the device is not standing outside the tradition. He is standing where the tradition was standing when it was young, before anybody had needed to write anything down, because nobody had died yet.

He wrote, on page eleven, a sentence I have carried for twenty years:

The isnad [es-NAAD] is a rope thrown to a man who cannot swim. It is not a criticism of the water.

Nineteen years old. In a damp room in a salt town. On his own.

He looked up at me when I had finished and his face was — I have to say it — *hopeful*. He was not accusing me. He was showing his teacher a piece of work.

And I understood, sitting there, several things at once.

The first was that he knew. Not the whole of it — he had not got to the hospital or the chair or the shoes, and he was not going to, not from me. But he knew the load-bearing part, which is that the man in front of him was not producing the tradition, and he had *decided it did not matter*, and he had built fourteen pages of scaffolding to hold that decision up.

The second was that the scaffolding was good. That was the horror. If it had been sophistry I could have taken it apart and sent him back to Qom with a fright and a clean conscience. It was not sophistry. It was an argument, and I have watched it hold up against much better men than me, later, in worse rooms.

The third was that he had done to himself, at nineteen, on paper, exactly what I had done to myself in Kashmar on a bus: he had looked at the machine, and seen the rot, and stayed.

I could have ended it there. That is the thing I want on the record, since everything after this is my fault and I would like the fault entered at the correct date. I could have said, *Mojtaba, burn this, go home, your mother thinks you're in Mashhad*. Four seconds. He would have gone.

What I said was:

"Page eleven is the whole thing. The rest is you being frightened of page eleven."

And he went red to the ears with happiness.

And I sent a boy of nineteen out of that room believing that he had, unaided, in a salt town, arrived at something.

He had. That is the worst part. He had.

PART FOUR — THE FIRE

Lessons Twenty-Eight to Thirty-Five

28.

A leash is easier to wear than a rope. That is the point of it.

Haj Rasoul asked me to tea on a Sunday in the twelfth month, in his own house, which he had never done.

It is a good house. Four generations. There is a room at the back that they keep for guests with a window onto a small yard with a fig tree in it, and he sat me under the window and poured, and we talked about the tiles for a while, because there was a problem with the tiles.

Then he put the pot down and said:

"You must be tired, Sayyid. Carrying it."

I said something about the season.

"No," he said, comfortably, "not the season." He turned his glass.

"We knew on the first Friday."

And then he waited, kindly, with his hands in his lap, and let me have it.

I would like to report that I did something. There was nothing to do. There is no move from that position; I have looked for one for twenty years and there is no move. I sat under the window of a good house with a fig tree in it and my ears made a noise.

He said, "Not the town. God forbid. The town would be extremely upset." He laughed, the door-in-a-draught. "Four of us. Myself, and three others, and one of them is dead now."

"The first Friday."

"You said four clauses and stopped." He was enjoying it. Not cruelly — the way an old man enjoys explaining a piece of machinery. "A man who knows what he's saying doesn't stop. He goes on. He can't help it, they train them to go on. You said four clauses and *stopped*, and I sat there in the third row and I thought — " he tapped the table twice, lightly — "ah. There he is."

"Why did you meet the bus."

"For eleven nights." He nodded. "Because I didn't know what would come."

"And when it came?"

"When it came," he said, "I took its hand in both of mine and thanked God."

There was a long pause. He refilled my glass, which I had not touched.

"You have to understand our position," he said. "We are a small town at the end of a road with a shrine that brings four provinces here three nights a year. That is not a small thing, Sayyid. That is the whole town. That is the kitchen, the guest rooms, the buses, the boy with the tea urn, my grandson's job, everything. And the shrine needs a man in a coat, because that is the arrangement, and the man in the coat is sent to us."

"By Qom."

"By whoever is doing it that year." He shrugged with his eyebrows. "And they send us — Sayyid, forgive me, but they send us either a young man who is here as a punishment and wants to be gone by spring, or they send us a serious one."

"A serious one is bad?"

"A serious one," said Haj Rasoul Sarmadi, "writes reports."

The fig tree moved in the window.

"A serious one has a friend in Mashhad and a teacher in Qom, and he arrives, and within a year he has an opinion about how the shrine is administered, and the opinion goes up, and then men come out from the province to look at our arrangements. And our arrangements are old, Sayyid. They are not modern. They would not survive being looked at by a man with a teacher in Qom."

"And I don't have a teacher in Qom."

"You," he said, very warmly, "have nobody in the world."

I have been threatened by professionals. I want to say clearly that nothing has ever been done to me as thoroughly as that sentence,

delivered by a seventy-one-year-old man refilling a glass I was not drinking from, with real affection, as a compliment.

"So it isn't that I'm useful," I said. "It's that I'm not able."

"It's both. That's why it's good." He sat back. "You're better than the last four. I'm not being kind, I have no reason to be kind, you're better than the last four and the town knows it and I know it. The women's Thursday alone —" he made a small gesture, conceding a point to me. "Nobody has ever done anything for the kitchen. In my lifetime. Not one of them."

"And if I'd been a fraud who was no good?"

"Then you'd have been a fraud who was no good," he said, "and we'd have managed, and in three years there'd have been a transfer."

We looked at each other for a while.

"Haj Rasoul."

"Sayyid."

"What happened to Sayyid Hadi Vahedi?"

And the old man's face did not change at all, which is the answer, and he said:

"He was transferred to Mashhad."

I have gone over the rest of that afternoon many times and there is nothing in it. We talked about the tiles. He walked me to the gate with his hand under my elbow, which he always did, and he said the thing he always said, which was *you'll say if there's anything*, and I said I would say.

Here is what I understood on the walk back along the wall.

For eleven months I had been congratulating myself on a magnificent piece of work. I had thought I was a man who had got in. I had thought — God, the vanity of it, I can hardly write it down — I had thought that I was running a long, elegant confidence operation on nine hundred people.

I had been running nothing. I had been *acquired*.

The tin on the first night was not a temptation, it was an aptitude test. The freedom to do as I liked in that town was not the negligence of a trusting old man, it was policy. Every single thing I had taken as evidence of my own skill was a fitting. And I had spent eleven months wagging.

A rope you can work at. A rope is a *relationship*; a rope has two ends and one of them is yours.

I had been on a leash since the first Friday and I had been trotting.

29.

Everyone in the building has made my arrangement. That is not a comfort.

I did not sleep that night and what kept me up was not Haj Rasoul.

It was the man in the corridor in Kashmar with the knee, who had not believed in any of it for twenty years, and who stayed because somebody had to bury eleven hundred mothers properly and he was not prepared to hand the job to a boy from Qom.

Because on Sunday afternoon I had finally understood what he was.

He was on a leash too. Of course he was. He had a district and a stipend tier and a bishop somewhere who knew exactly what he was worth and exactly how little he could do about it, and there were men above him doing something with a cement plant, and he *knew*, and he stayed, and every funeral he conducted was simultaneously the most decent act available to a human being in that province and a small piece of maintenance work on the machine that was running the cement.

And there is no way out of that. That is the thing I want the boy to understand when he reads this, if he ever does, and I suspect he will read it at exactly the age when it will do him the most harm.

There is no version where you do the good thing and not the other thing. The coat that lets you into the worst hour of a stranger's life is the same coat, the identical object, the *actual physical garment*, that the men with the cement are wearing. You cannot go into that room in your own clothes. Nobody will let you in. And once you are

in it, you are in it, and the good you do in there is real — I insist on this, I have seen it, I have done it, fourteen people slept better because of a question about a saucepan — and it is also, at the same time, a small deposit into an account that is not yours and that you will never see the balance of.

I have been a criminal all my life and I have never had to hold two things like that at once. In my trade the arithmetic is simple: you take a thing, they lose the thing. It is honest work in the sense that no part of it requires you to believe anything.

I lay on a transparent carpet in Shurabad and turned it over until first light and I could not get it to come out.

And then, at about five in the morning, with the salt going in the walls, I had the thought that I would call the worst thought of my life if I did not know that it was simply true, and it was this:

I am the only one in the building who is here for nothing.

Because they had all made the arrangement for a reason. The knee had eleven hundred families. The corpse-washer had thirty-one years and a wife two years gone. Haj Rasoul had a town, a kitchen, a grandson's job. Mojtaba had fourteen pages and a rope thrown to a man who could not swim.

And I had put the coat on because it was on a chair and nobody was watching it.

That is what I could not get past, at five in the morning, and it is the only thing in this entire account that I would still call shame, in the technical sense, and I have thought about it every week for twenty years.

Everybody else in that building had paid to get in.

30.

She has her mother's flatness and my jokes, and I did the only paternal act available to a man in my position, which was surveillance.

In the third week of the forty days I ran a check on the man my daughter was marrying.

I want to describe how, because it is the most sordid thing I did in Shurabad and it is also, technically, the first act of fatherhood I had performed since 2010.

The clergy of this country are not a hierarchy. They are a *network*, which is a different animal, and I had eleven months of standing next to it. Every man in that Kashmar hall had a district. Every district has a mosque, and every mosque has a man who knows who everybody's family is, and the whole thing runs on telephone calls that begin with four minutes of health enquiries and end with somebody saying *ah, that family, yes*.

I knew the town from the folder. She had left the folder on the desk for four days.

So I made a telephone call to a man I had met once in a corridor, and I asked after his knee, and his mother, and the tiles, and then I said that a family from his district had approached the shrine on a matter and I wished to know, in confidence, whether they were people of good standing.

And he told me. Four minutes. Everything.

There is no privacy in this country. There is an enormous amount of modesty and no privacy whatsoever, and the two things are not related, and I had spent my whole criminal career admiring this fact from the outside without once being on the inside of it.

The man's name was Farid [fa-REED]. He was twenty-six. He worked in the parts department of an agricultural machinery dealership, he had two sisters, his father had died of the heart in 2019, he was regarded as reliable, he had never been in any trouble at all, and there was a slight embarrassment in the family about an uncle and a loan.

He was fine.

That is what I got, in the office, at eleven o'clock at night, with a telephone in my hand and my heart going: *he is completely fine*.

I sat with that for a long time.

Because I had been prepared. I had been prepared for a bad one — I had, God forgive me, been *hoping* for a bad one, and I had gone through the entire fantasy in some detail over the preceding fortnight: the discovery, the intervention, the quiet word, the thing done from behind the coat that could never be traced or thanked. I had written the whole film. I had cast myself extremely well in it.

And the boy sells tractor parts and has never been in any trouble at all.

There was nothing for me to do. There has never been anything for me to do. That is the entire content of my fatherhood: a man on a telephone in a stolen coat, at eleven at night, four hundred kilometres away, establishing that his daughter has organised her own life competently and requires no assistance from him in any particular.

I said thank you, and asked again about the knee, and put the telephone down.

And what I did next is the part I would remove if I were making myself look good.

I went into the notes on my own telephone and I wrote down: *Farid. 26. Parts dept, agri machinery. 2 sisters. Father d. 2019, heart. Uncle — loan?*

I put my future son-in-law in my notes like a job.

The uncle is a real thing and the loan is a real thing and there was, four years later, an occasion when it mattered, and I did something about it from a distance, and neither of them will ever know, and I am not going to describe it here because it is the only clean thing I own and I would like to keep one.

31.

I never carried a weapon. Count how many times I have said it.

I have said it four times in this account, not counting the line at the head of this one, which I wrote first and which is the reason I finally counted. It is the only sentence I have repeated at all.

Vakilabad. Twelve years, of which I served four. What everybody knows, including my daughter, who does nine minutes on it at parties, is that Panjshanbeh went through the window of a chemist's flat in Mashhad on a Thursday night in 2021 that turned out to be somebody's cousin's summer house, and got twelve years, and that is the joke, and it is a good joke, and the reason it is a good joke is that a flat with nobody in it is funny.

There was somebody in it.

Her name was Mahin [maa-HEEN]. She was eighty-four. She was the chemist's mother and she lived in the back room and she had not been mentioned by anybody at any stage, because the flat was empty, because the family was in Tehran, because nobody counts the mother.

I knocked. I want that entered. I knocked twice, unhurried, the way my father knocked, and I waited the full count and there was nothing, and I went in.

She was in the corridor.

I do not know how long she had been standing there. She had a glass of water in her hand. She was very small and she had her hair down and she looked at me with an expression I have never been able to name and have tried for four years in a cell, and what I did — the entire physical action, the whole of it, my complete contribution —

I put my hands up.

I put my hands up, palms out, at shoulder height, and I said, "Khanum [khaa-NOOM] — it's all right — I'm going —"

And she stepped back.

She stepped back and her heel went onto the edge of the runner and the runner went, and she came down on her hip on a tiled floor, and the glass did not break, which I have never understood and which I still think about, the glass rolled to the wall and did not break.

I never touched her.

That is true. That is *literally, physically, forensically true*, and it was true in the courtroom and it is true now, and I have said it to myself perhaps ten thousand times since, and here is what I have to report about it:

It is the most useless true thing I have ever owned.

I called an ambulance. From her telephone, in the corridor, and I said the address twice, and then I sat on the floor two metres from her because she did not want me closer, and she did not want me to go either, and I sat there for eleven minutes with my hands where she could see them and she asked me twice whether her son knew, and I said yes, which was a lie, and I have never regretted a lie less.

Then I heard the ambulance on the street and I went out of the window.

They had me in nine days.

She had a fracture at the top of the femur and they pinned it and she was walking with a frame by the spring. She died in October, of pneumonia, which is what happens, which is what the doctor said happens, which is what my own lawyer said in mitigation with a great deal of energy, and the judge in Mashhad listened to it all and did not appear to find it as decisive as we did.

She was eighty-four.

The woman in the corner-by-the-window house in Shurabad, in the third month, the first funeral I ever conducted, the one who died in her sleep and about whom fourteen people argued for ninety minutes about which of them she had preferred, was eighty-four years old.

I sat in the corner of that room and drank four glasses of tea and did my mother's trick and could not find the seam and went home disturbed and put the whole thing in a drawer, and it took me another nine months to open the drawer, and when I opened it there was nothing in it except a very small woman in a corridor holding a glass of water that did not break.

I never carried a weapon.

I do not know what else to do with the sentence. I cannot stop saying it and I have stopped being able to say it in the tone I used to say it in, which was the tone of a professional distinguishing himself from animals, and the tone it comes out in now is the other one, the one you use at a counter, when you are explaining something to a clerk who has already written *insufficient* on the form.

32.

A room built for a purpose will tell you the purpose. It has nothing else to talk about.

Ten days after the tea with the fig tree I went into the chamber sober, with a tape measure I had borrowed on a pretext about carpets, and I read the room.

This is a professional skill and I have never met a layman who has it. Most people look at a room and see what it is for, which is what the room is telling them. A burglar looks at a room and sees what it is for *now*, and underneath that what it was for before, and underneath that what somebody changed and when and how much it cost them, and a room cannot lie about this, because a room is made of the decisions people paid money for.

Four paces by five. Stone. Barrel vault, low. Door on the east, single, heavy, no second exit. Grave in the centre under the lattice.

And the vent, high on the north wall, bricked.

Here is what I found in an hour with a tape measure and no candle.

One. The brick in the vent is not the brick of the wall and it is not the mortar of the wall. It is a later job, competently done, flush,

pointed to match. Somebody paid for that. You do not pay a mason to close a hole flush and point it to match unless the hole closing matters to you; if you simply want a draught stopped you stuff it, and the shrine of Emamzadeh Nur, God knows, has stuffed plenty.

Two. It is the only aperture in that room other than the door. Four paces by five, stone, and one hole, and somebody closed it.

Three. The door has a felt strip along the bottom edge. Old felt, replaced many times, the current one perhaps five years old and the nails going back through four generations of previous ones. Somebody has been maintaining a seal on the bottom of that door since before my father was born.

Four, and this is the one that made me sit down on the step outside: there are four iron rings set into the floor, one in each quarter, about a hand's width across, set into the stone itself and not into any later screed. Old. Older, I would say, than the dome. They are the feet of the braziers. They stop them travelling.

A brazier does not need a ring in the floor to stop it travelling. A brazier needs a ring in the floor if it is going to be there for eight hours with two men working around it in the dark and nobody able to see where anything is.

Somebody built that room to hold four fires and no air.

I went back to the office and I got the ledgers out and I looked for the mason, and the mason is in there, in 1961, in the hand of Haj Rasoul's father: a payment, and it is not a small payment, and beside it, in the column where the trustees have written a note against every disbursement since 1938, there is a note, and the note says:

for the north wall, as before.

As before.

I went back further. I found the previous one in 1919, in a different hand, in the accounts of a different Sarmadi, and the note against that one is *the north wall, closed again*, which means it had been open, which means somebody had opened it, which means that at some point between those two dates a man had come into that

room, looked at the north wall, and decided the room needed air — and had been overruled, at cost, by the family.

Nineteen custodians in eighty-seven years. Nobody stays.

And the last thing I looked for, and I looked for it because I am what I am and because you always check the consumables, was the *esfand*.

It is in there. Of course it is in there, it is in there every year, it is a legitimate expense, nobody has ever hidden it in the slightest. Sacks. Every year, in the season, in the accounts, openly, between the paraffin and the whitewash, going back to the first page in 1938 and, I have no doubt, back through every book before that one which was lost in the fire.

And I looked at the quantity and I thought: *that is a great deal of esfand*.

And that is *all* I thought.

I want to be very precise about my own stupidity here, because it is the largest single failure of my life and it is not a moral failure, it is a professional one, and those are the ones that keep you up.

I had, at that moment, in a room, on a desk, in my own hands: a stone box built to hold fire and no air; a seal maintained on the door for four generations; a vent that had been closed and closed again at expense against the wishes of at least one man who wanted it open; four iron rings in the floor; a reputation across four provinces for people *seeing things*; and an invoice for sacks of the seed my mother burned over my head when I was nine.

And what I concluded was: *they are managing the atmosphere*.

That is what I wrote down. I wrote down that the family had, over generations, discovered that a dark sealed room full of smoke and grief produces a powerful experience in a crowd, and had engineered the room to produce it reliably, and had kept it quiet because you cannot advertise it without ruining it.

Which is true. Every word of that is true and I was rather pleased with it.

I did not think about the seed.

Nobody thinks about the seed. That is the whole of it, that is the entire ninety-year business plan, and it is not even a plan, nobody sat down and *invented* it — you cannot hide a thing better than by putting it in the one category that every single person in the country has agreed not to look at. It is what your grandmother does when you get a promotion. It is what the taxi driver does to his own dashboard. It is not a substance. It is not anything. It is *esfand*.

I had it in my hand in a room at two in the morning and I put it back in the cupboard, third from the left, spine out.

33.

Go in looking for the trick. Find the trick. Watch it work anyway.

The mourning nights came round again and I went into the chamber on the second night with my eyes open.

I sat at the north wall, under the brick, because Haj Rasoul had told me a year earlier that it was easier there, and because I now wanted very much to know what he had meant.

And I caught all of it.

I saw the two men in rotation. I saw the boy who brings the sacks in from the store on the west side and hands them through the door and does not come in. I saw one of the men, at about the fourth hour, do a thing with the second brazier which I would describe as *feeding it up* — a double handful, worked into the coals with an iron, in a room that already had sixty people breathing in it and had not had a change of air since ten o'clock.

I saw it. I noted the times. I am, I would like to say, an extremely good witness.

And at the fifth hour the stone breathed and I went with it.

I want to be honest about how little the knowing was worth. There is a thing men in my trade say about drink, that you cannot see through a bottle from inside it, and I had assumed my whole life that this was self-pity. It is not self-pity, it is a technical description. I sat under that brick with a complete and accurate inventory of the mechanism in my head — sacks, rings, felt, vent, 1961, *for the*

north wall, as before — and the mechanism took me apart exactly as thoroughly as it had taken me apart the year before, and the only difference the knowledge made was that this time I was also embarrassed.

Time came apart again. The geometry came.

And my mother was in the room.

Not a vision. I have to keep saying this and I know it does not help. There was no figure and there was no light and nothing appeared. What happened was that Parvaneh was *in the room*, in the way that a person is in a room when you have your back to them, and I knew where she was, which was slightly behind me and to the left, and I did not turn round because you do not turn round.

She was doing the thing with her hands. Over my head. Three times round, muttering. The thing she did in the kitchen when someone had looked at me too admiringly at a wedding, which I had stood through at nine years old with my eyes shut being embarrassed, and which she had done over me at every threshold of my life — school, the day of my wedding, the day they took me, I am told the day I was born.

And I sat in a stone room in Shurabad at forty-six years of age with my eyes shut, being embarrassed.

And I said, out loud, "I'm sorry about the flat."

Which is not a thing I have ever said to anybody.

Then the queue came back. It came back exactly as it had the year before, which frightened me more than anything else that happened in that room, because I know what I am like and I know that a man who has been given a vision will build it up between one year and the next — will add to it, improve the rhythm of the third clause, the way the man in Bardaskan improved mine. I had been braced for it to be bigger.

It was identical.

Women along a wall, in daylight, in clothes from before I was born. A courtyard I did not know. And near the front, one of them, young, large and loud, carrying something in both arms in the way you

carry something you have brought a long way, and her face was the face I had watched go from the sink to the stove for the first thirty years of my life.

She was waiting for something.

She was in a *queue*, and she was waiting, and behind her the wall was the wall of the courtyard of Emamzadeh Nur, which I had walked along twice a day for a year, and which I did not recognise in that room and did recognise afterwards, at four in the morning, sitting on the step with the cold coming in, when it was too late to look at it properly.

Here is what I decided.

I decided it was grief.

I was a man whose mother had died while he was in prison, who had not been at the funeral, who had not been permitted to be at the funeral, and who had spent four years and eleven months not thinking about it with tremendous discipline. And I had now sat twice in a dark room full of smoke with sixty people who were all thinking about their dead, and my dead had come, as anybody's would.

That is a good explanation. It is a very good explanation. It accounts for everything except the wall of the courtyard, and I decided the wall was suggestion, because I had walked past it twice a day for a year.

I went out at first light and Haj Rasoul was in the courtyard with a glass of tea and said, "It's something, isn't it," exactly as he had the year before, word for word, standing in the same place, looking extremely well rested.

And I said, "Haj Rasoul, when did your father brick the north wall?"

And he said, without any pause at all, "Before my time, Sayyid. Drink that, you're pale."

34.

A fraud can survive being believed. He cannot survive being known.

Shokouh came into the office three days later and shut the door, which she had never done in thirteen months and which in that town was roughly equivalent to firing a rifle into the air.

She stayed by the door. Four feet. She was always exactly four feet away; I do not believe she ever measured it.

She said, "The girl's coming back."

"In Farvardin [far-var-DEEN]. For the witnessing."

"Right." She looked at the desk. "And after that?"

"After that she goes home and gets married."

"Yes," said Shokouh. "And after that?"

I did not say anything.

"I want to ask you two things," she said, "and I don't want either of the answers, so you can just stand there."

I stood there.

"The first one is that you're not what you say you are." She said it without any weight on it at all, the way you would report a delivery. "I've known since about the colander. Don't. I don't want the details, I've never wanted the details, and if you start telling me now I'll walk out of this room and you'll never get it back. I'm not asking. I'm telling you that I know, so that you stop working, because you've been working since October and it's exhausting to watch."

I said, "All right."

"The second one," she said, "is the girl."

And there it was.

"She's yours."

I have been in a courtroom in Mashhad. I have sat under a window in a good house with a fig tree in it. Neither of those was this, and the reason is that Haj Rasoul had come at me with information and

Shokouh Aramesh came at me with *attention*, which is the only weapon I have ever respected, and she had thirteen months of it, and she had been storing it.

"She stands like you," she said. "She stands up wrong, like you. When she came into the kitchen on the second day she looked at the pots the way you look at a room, all four corners, in about a second, and I've only ever seen two people do that and one of them is you and I don't know who taught the other one." She was not looking at me. "And when Zahra [zah-RAA] asked you if she was any relation, you said no, and it was the best thing I have ever seen anybody do. It was beautiful. And I wrote sixty-one down again because my hand had to be doing something."

The salt in the walls.

"Did she know?" said Shokouh.

"No."

"God." She put her hand over her mouth for a second, then took it away. "God. Four days? She was here four days."

"She did nine minutes on me," I said. "On the second evening. In this room. It's very good, actually, she's got callbacks in it."

And Shokouh Aramesh laughed.

She laughed the way you laugh at a funeral when someone does an impression of the deceased complaining about a saucepan — helplessly, horribly, with her hand back over her mouth and her eyes going — and then she stopped, and stood by the door, and neither of us said anything for a while.

Then she said, "Are you going to tell her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

And I said the true thing, because there was no longer any point in the other kind:

"Because she's got a ruling. I gave her a ruling. She asked me if she was permitted to hate him and I sat her down on the wall by the tap and I told her yes, and I made it beautiful, and she wrote it

down on her telephone with her thumbs. And it's the only useful thing anyone has ever given her about me." I heard my own voice do something I did not authorise. "If I tell her, she loses the ruling. She'd have to start again, at nineteen, from a man in a coat. She's got a wedding in Ordibehesht."

Shokouh looked at me for a long time.

"You know what you've done, don't you," she said.

"Yes."

"You've made yourself into her priest so you'd never have to be her father."

I did not answer that, and I have not answered it since, and I am not able to answer it now.

She opened the door. Then she stopped, with her hand on it, and said — and this is the sentence that I have kept, out of everything, out of all of it, this is the one I would take with me:

"I'm not going to tell her either."

And she went out and across the courtyard to the kitchen, and that is the moment I stopped being able to leave Shurabad, and everything after this is just the arithmetic of it.

35.

Eleven weeks. Count them.

I have never been with a woman for longer than eleven weeks.

I do not mean married; I was married for seven years. I mean the other thing, the thing I was actually good at, the only professional competence I have ever had that did not involve a window. And the method was not charm — I have no charm, I have a flat voice and a face like a bus timetable — the method was *attention*.

I listened like it was a trade. I remembered the names of people's sisters. I arrived on time. I noticed when something had changed about a room. For a period of somewhere between six and eleven weeks I was, in each individual case, an extraordinarily good man — better than the men who loved them, materially better, more

present, more accurate — and then, at some point in the eleventh week, without any decision being made and without any incident, I would find that I had stopped.

Not left. Stopped. The attention would simply go off, the way a lamp goes off, and what was left behind was a man who could not remember why he had asked about the sister.

I used to think this was a defect of feeling. I was quite proud of it in a small dark way, as a thing that made me interesting.

In the fourteenth month in Shurabad, on the road, with a bag in my hand, I worked out what it actually was, and it is not interesting at all.

Eleven weeks is how long you can pay attention to somebody before you have to *know* them. That is all it is. It is not a romantic interval. It is the point at which the account of a person you have assembled by watching runs out, and the only way to continue is to be told things, which requires being in the room as yourself, and I have never been in a room as myself in my life.

I had been in Shurabad thirteen months.

That is the number I want in the record, because it is the whole book: I did to nine hundred people what I used to do to women, and it did not stop at eleven weeks, and it did not stop because for the first time the room would not let me leave and would not let me be anybody else either, and the result — the actual measurable result, and I want to be entirely unsentimental about it — is that a town in Khorasan was materially better off, and thirty-two women had a Thursday, and a boy had fourteen pages, and a widow had been told her kitchen was noticed, and a girl had a ruling.

None of which I intended. All of which is real.

I packed in the fourteenth month, on a Tuesday, in the afternoon, with everybody at the tap.

The bag was the dead man's bag. There was almost nothing in it, because I had almost nothing: the comb, the tin of wire hooks, the photograph of the woman who was either his mother or his wife, which I had never been able to throw away. My own telephone.

Four hundred thousand tomans that were mine, out of my own stipend, which I had counted twice, because I have never in my life been so careful about the provenance of money as I was that week.

I did not take anything from the tin.

I went out at four in the morning across the courtyard, past the tap, along the wall, and up the one road to the top of the town where the salt starts, and I stood there for a while.

You can see a long way from there. The flat goes white before it goes light. There is a point about six kilometres out where the road stops being a road you can see and becomes a rumour, and the first bus comes through at ten past five, and I had been standing there for forty minutes and it was five o'clock.

And I have been asked what I thought about, and I did not think about my daughter, and I did not think about God, and I did not think about the woman in the corridor.

What I thought about was this: *the tea is going to be terrible for the next thirty years and there will be nobody there who says so.*

That is it. That is the whole of the moral reasoning of Nader Fani at five o'clock in the morning at the top of a salt town, and I am aware of how it looks, and I have decided not to improve it.

I heard the bus at eight minutes past.

I stood and I watched it come up out of the rumour end of the road, all the way, four or five minutes, headlights and then a shape and then a bus, and it slowed at the top of the town the way they do, and the door opened, and the driver looked out at a sayyid standing at the roadside at ten past five in the morning with a bag in his hand.

And he said, "Aqa? Are you coming?"

And I said, "No. God bless you. I was seeing someone off."

And he shut the door and went, and I walked back down the hill in the wrong shoes and put the comb and the hooks and the photograph back on the shelf, and I was in the courtyard at half past six when Shokouh came out with the bucket, and she looked at the bag by my door, and looked at me, and said:

"There's tea."

"Is it terrible?"

"It's terrible," she said.

And she went and knelt down and started insulting the floor.

PART FIVE — THE HANDOVER

Lessons Thirty-Six to Forty

36.

When they come to test you, say nothing and let the boy talk.

They sent a man out from Mashhad in the fourteenth month.

He was about fifty, in good cloth, with the accent, and he came in a car with a driver and he was courteous to everybody in a way that took approximately nine seconds to identify as an audit.

Haj Rasoul was delighted to see him. Haj Rasoul was so delighted to see him that I understood within a minute that the old man had not known he was coming and was extremely unhappy about it, and I want to record that this was the first and only time in fourteen months that I saw Haj Rasoul Sarmadi's hands do something he had not authorised.

The visitor stayed two days. He looked at the tiles. He looked at the guest rooms. He asked about the mourning nights, and the numbers, and how we managed the crowds in a chamber that size, and Haj Rasoul talked about ventilation for eleven minutes without once using the word.

And on the second evening, in the office, with tea, he turned to me.

It was not aggressive. It was worse than aggressive; it was collegial. He asked me where I had studied. He asked it the way you ask a man where he grew up.

Now, I had a story. Obviously I had a story — I had had a story since the fourth day, I had polished it for fourteen months, and it was a good story, and it would not have survived four questions from a man in good cloth with the accent.

I did not use it.

I did the thing. I looked at the middle distance with an expression of mild sorrow and I let eleven seconds go past, and then I said, "It was a long time ago and I don't think about it much," which is a sentence with a hole in the middle of it, and I watched him decide whether to put his hand in the hole.

He decided to. He was good.

He said, "Under whom, though? I only ask because there's a — forgive me — there's a *quality* to the way you handle a room, and one hears it and one wonders whose it is."

And Mojtaba Sadeghpour, nineteen years old, sitting at the side with the tea things, said:

"Forgive me, Aqa."

Everybody looked at him.

And that boy — that boy, in a room with a man from Mashhad who could have ended his career with a telephone call, on his own initiative, having been asked nothing —

He gave him page eleven.

He gave him the rope and the water. He gave him the whole argument, from the top, carefully, with the *it may be that I am mistaken*, and he built it in front of a hostile professional in about four minutes: that a chain is a device for carrying a thing and not the thing; that the question of whose it is, is downstream of the question of whether it lands; that a man may stand where the tradition stood before anybody had needed to write anything down.

And then he did something I had not taught him and could not have taught him, because it requires a kind of nerve I do not possess.

He turned it into a compliment.

He said that he had noticed the same quality in the Aqa's own manner over the last two days, and that he had wondered whose it was, and that he had concluded — with respect — that it was probably nobody's, and that this was the highest thing one could say about a man in this line.

There was a silence.

And the man from Mashhad laughed, and put his glass down, and said, "Where did you find him?"

And I said, "He was sent."

They talked about Qom for the rest of the evening and the audit was over, and the car left at nine the next morning, and Haj Rasoul walked it to the gate with his hand under the driver's elbow.

I want to describe what I felt watching a nineteen-year-old defend me with an argument I could not have made, in a language I cannot read, against a man who had come to find exactly what he had found and went home without it.

It was not gratitude and it was not pride.

It was the specific sensation of watching a man sign a document without reading it, when you are the one who put it in front of him.

37.

The generous offer is the cage. They are always generous. That is how the door shuts quietly.

The letter came in the fifteenth month, in a brown envelope with a provincial stamp, addressed to *the Custodian, Emamzadeh Nur*, and Mojtaba brought it in with the rest and I opened it with a knife while he was talking about something else.

It was a circular. It went to every shrine and every mosque of any size in the province, which is perhaps four hundred of them, and it was about a programme.

There is an office now that arranges for clerics to go into the prisons and sit with the men. Not to preach — the letter was quite emphatic about this, and the emphasis was the tell, because a man who is not preaching does not need to say so twice. To sit with them. To be *present in their process of return*.

It was a good letter. That is what I want to convey. It was written by somebody who believed every word of it, and it made an argument I have never been able to knock down, which is that a man in a cell is in the worst hour of his life and that somebody ought to be allowed in there who is not employed by the institution that put him in it.

It invited the custodian to indicate his willingness.

And at the bottom of the second page, above the stamp, there was a name and a rank.

I sat in that office for a long time with my thumb on it.

He had gone up. Of course he had gone up; men like that always go up, because the statistics are real and because he genuinely did not steal anything. He had a province now. He had four hundred shrines and a programme and a form for indicating willingness, and he had spent his entire working life on a single sincere idea, which is that men are made good by pressure, and here at last was pressure with a warm face on it.

And I understood that if I indicated my willingness, I would be driven in a car to the gate of a prison in this province, and I would go in wearing this coat, and men who had known me as Panjshanbeh would be brought into a room to be sat with.

I also understood, holding the letter, that this was not a trap. That is the part that has never stopped being funny to me in the specific way that things are funny at four in the morning. There was no trap. There was no cleverness. Sarhang Zaker had no idea where I was, had probably not thought about me in three years, and the letter had gone to four hundred addresses. The cage was not built for me. The cage is simply the shape of the world and I had walked into a corner of it by accident, which is the only way anybody ever does.

Mojtaba said, "Will you go, Sayyid? They say it counts for a great deal."

"It does count," I said. "It counts for a great deal."

And I took a pen and I wrote across the bottom of the reply slip, and what I wrote was:

I cannot come. May God keep you well.

Eight words. I counted them at the time and I have counted them since, and it remains the only piece of correspondence in my life that I would not change.

I gave it to Mojtaba to post and he posted it, and four hundred shrines indicated their willingness or did not, and a man in a provincial office read a slip from a salt town at the end of a road and put it on a pile, and that was the end of it, and I have never in twenty years stopped waiting for it not to be the end of it.

38.

Golnar came back in Farvardin, four months after I had told her forty days, because the court in Tehran [teh-RAAN] had done what courts do and because a customary period is only customary until a clerk gets hold of it. She wrote twice. I answered both letters in two lines and read them about nine times each.

There is no witnessing. I invented it in eleven minutes at half past four in the afternoon to buy six weeks. But she had come four hundred kilometres for it, and Mojtaba had asked me twice what the form of it was, and so on the morning of the twenty-first I performed it.

We did it in the courtyard, by the tap. Mojtaba stood at my right with the register. Shokouh stood at the door of the kitchen with her hands in front of her and did not come closer. There was nobody else, because I had said it should be quiet, and Haj Rasoul had raised his eyebrows at that and had not argued.

I said what I had made up. Some of it was in Arabic. It was four clauses, and it was about the going-out of a man from a house, and the house continuing, and it was among the better things I made in that town.

Then I sat down at the table with the pen.

The statement was three paragraphs, in my hand, on shrine paper with the stamp. It set out that Golnar Fani, daughter of Nader Fani, had attended at Emamzadeh Nur on such a date and again on such a date; that she had made enquiry as to her father in accordance with the customary period; that the enquiry had been witnessed; and that no knowledge of him had been obtained.

I wrote her father's name in my own hand.

I wrote it slowly, because the pen was bad, and because I had not written it in four years, and I looked at it on the paper for a moment before I went on.

Then I signed it, and I stamped it, and I dated it, and I gave it to her.

She read it standing up. She read it twice. And then she said, "That's it, then," in the flat voice, her mother's voice, and she folded it once and put it in the plastic wallet with everything else.

"Thank you, Haj Aqa."

"It's nothing."

"It's half a year of my life," she said. "It's not nothing."

She put the wallet under her arm. Then she said, "Can I ask — is it wrong that I'm not sad?"

And I said, "No."

"Everyone keeps waiting for me to be sad."

"Then they'll wait."

She nodded. She looked around the courtyard, at the tap and the wall and the blue dome, in the way that people do when they are fixing a place in order to be able to say afterwards that they went there.

"It's a good place," she said. "It's very quiet."

"It's the salt."

"Right." She put out her hand to shake mine and then remembered, and took it back, and laughed at herself, and said, "Sorry. Sorry."

"It's all right."

"Goodbye, Haj Aqa."

"Goodbye."

She went across the courtyard and out through the gate, and Shokouh was still standing at the door of the kitchen with her hands in front of her, and she did not move for a long time after the gate had shut.

39.

Take the student. Do it knowing exactly what you are.

The bus goes at ten past nine and I did not walk her to it.

I stood at the office window instead, at an angle, the way you stand at a window when you do not wish to be seen standing at a window, and I watched my daughter walk up the one road in Shurabad with a plastic wallet under her arm, and get onto a bus, and I watched the bus go down the hill and become a shape and then headlights and then a rumour.

I have been asked whether I nearly went after her. I did not nearly go after her. There was no nearly. A man who has spent his life in stairwells does not have a *nearly*; he has a sequence of small decisions that were each individually correct, and at the end of them a bus.

At about eleven o'clock Mojtaba came and found me and said that he had written to Qom.

I said, "About what?"

"To extend," he said. "The six months finished in Dey [DEY] and nobody wrote and I didn't say anything, and I've written now to ask for two years."

"Two years."

"Or three." He was standing extremely straight. "Sayyid — I would like to ask formally. To read with you. Properly. As a student."

The stove ticked.

Here is the accounting, done at the time, in the four seconds available, and I want it entered exactly as it was, without improvement.

I knew that the boy could not read with me because there was nothing to read with. I knew that his mother thought he was in Mashhad. I knew that he had built fourteen pages of scaffolding to hold up a decision he had made about a man who did not exist, and that he had now defended it in front of a professional and won, and that the winning had welded it. I knew that if he stayed two years

he would be, at twenty-one, a man with a brilliant argument and no ground under it, and that the ground would go at some point in his thirties, in a room, in front of somebody, in some way I could not predict and would not be there for.

And I knew that I had watched him sign the document I put in front of him and I had not read it out to him.

Four seconds.

I said, "Three years."

He went red to the ears and thanked me and went out to write to Qom again to correct the number, and I sat in that office and listened to him going up the passage two steps at a time.

That is the whole of it. That is the man. I have written five parts and thirty-nine of these and if you want the entire thing in one movement it is a man at a window watching a bus become a rumour, turning round, and taking a student.

I started writing these that night.

I am not going to say here who they are for, because he does not know yet, and because there are things I have to set down before I can put his name in the same sentence as my own. He will work it out. He will be angry for about a year and then he will not be, and that is a thing I have no control over and have made my peace with, which is a lie, and I have left it in.

40.

Burn it yourself.

Three nights later I went into the chamber alone and lit the braziers.

It was not the season. There was nobody in the town who needed anything. The reason I did it is not available to me even now and I have stopped hunting for it; I have come to think that a man who has spent his whole life being unable to say why he did things should be allowed one occasion where that is simply the truth.

I took the key off the hook. I opened the door and let it stand open for a while.

The iron rings in the floor, one in each quarter. The felt along the bottom edge. The brick in the north wall, flush, pointed to match, paid for in 1961 and before that in 1919, *for the north wall, as before.*

I set two of the four braziers, not all four, because I am not a fool, and I lit them, and I took the sack from the west store and I did what my mother did.

A double handful. Onto the coals.

And it went off the way it goes off — the small hard crackle, the noise every single person born in this country knows before they know their own name — and the smoke came up, and I stood in a stone room under a blue dome in a salt town four hundred kilometres from the flat where I was born, and I smelt my mother's kitchen.

Then I went round three times, over my own head, with my hand, muttering, the way she did.

I have done a great many stupid things and that is the one I would keep.

I sat down under the brick for a while and nothing came. There was no attention in the room. There was smoke and there was stone and there was a man of forty-six in the wrong shoes, and after perhaps an hour I put the braziers out and swept, and left the door open, and went back to the office to do the register.

Because there is a register. There is always a register. Every pilgrim who stays a night at Emamzadeh Nur goes into a book, and has done since 1938, name and town and what they came for, and the books go in the same cupboard as the ledgers, and Haj Rasoul had asked me on the Sunday to find a date for him out of the old ones for something to do with the guest rooms.

He wanted 1979.

I want to be clear that this was not a search. I have looked for things in the dark all my life and I know what looking feels like and this was not it. An old man asked a favour about the guest rooms and I opened a book.

It is a wide page, ruled in four columns: the name, the town, the purpose, and the last one which is narrow and which the trustees have used, on and off for ninety years, for whatever they felt was worth writing.

The hand is Haj Rasoul's father's. I knew it from the mason's payment. He wrote small and he wrote badly and he did not join anything.

And a third of the way down the page for the month of Aban [aa-BAAN], in the year 1357 of our calendar, which is the autumn of 1978, in a town at the end of a road that I had walked out to the top of and come back from, is:

Parvaneh Fani. Tehran.

I did not move.

I have sat in stairwells for four hours and I did not move, and then I put my finger on the paper, which I had never once done to any document in that building, and I went across the page.

The third column, the purpose, says: *chelleh*.

Forty nights.

My mother came to this town in the autumn of 1978 and stayed forty nights, and I was born the following summer, and she never mentioned it, and she never mentioned it, and she went to her grave without mentioning it, and she burned that seed over my head at every threshold of my life from the day I was born until the day they took me away, and I stood in that chamber four hours ago and burned it over myself.

And in the fourth column, the narrow one, the one they use for whatever they think is worth writing, in the bad small hand that does not join anything, there is a name.

It is the name of the custodian who attended her.

It is the name that is on the identity card in the pocket of the coat I am wearing.

GLOSSARY

abaya a-baa-YAA — Arabic. ‘abā’ah, cloak. The loose black outer cloak worn over the qaba by Shi’a clergy; in this book, the garment Shokouh remakes by eye.

Aban aa-BAAN — Middle Persian. from the Avestan āpō, “the waters”; the eighth month of the Iranian calendar, late October to late November. Also, in Zoroastrian usage, the divinity of the waters — a name older than the calendar that carries it.

amameh ah-maa-MEH — Arabic. ‘imāmah, turban. The wound cloth of the clerical turban. Black denotes claimed descent from the Prophet; white denotes a cleric without that descent.

bismillah bes-mel-LAAH — Arabic. “in the name of God.” The invocation that opens almost every formal utterance, recitation, meal, and journey.

chelleh chel-LEH — Persian. from chehel, forty. A period of forty days or nights undertaken for devotion, retreat, mourning, or petition. Forty is the load-bearing number of Persian life.

esfand es-FAND — Persian. the seed of wild rue, *Peganum harmala*. Burned on coals to turn away the evil eye, with a characteristic crackle and smoke recognised by every Iranian. Contains the β -carboline alkaloids harmine and harmaline; argued by some scholars to be the haoma of the Zoroastrian sacrifice.

Emamzadeh eh-maam-zaa-DEH — Persian. “descendant of an Imam.” Both the descendant and, by extension, the domed shrine built over such a grave. Thousands are scattered across Iran; the occupant of many is disputed.

Haj Aqa haaj AA-ghaa — Persian. honorific, roughly “reverend sir.” The standard address for a cleric whose name one does not know, or does not wish to use.

hadith ha-DEETH — Arabic. “report, account.” A saying or act attributed to the Prophet, transmitted with a chain of authorities. The chain is called the *isnad*.

isnad es-NAAD — Arabic. “support, backing.” The chain of named transmitters attached to a *hadith*, by which its reliability is assessed.

khanum khaa-NOOM — Persian. “lady, madam.” Courteous address to a woman, used after the given name.

minbar MEM-bar — Arabic. the stepped pulpit in a mosque from which the sermon is delivered.

nazr NAZR — Arabic. *nadhr*, vow. A pledge made to God, often at a shrine, and the money, food, or act given in fulfilment of it.

Panjshanbeh panj-shan-BEH — Persian. “Thursday,” literally “the fifth day.” The eve of the Muslim holy day and, in Iran, the night families gather.

qaba gha-BAA — Persian/Arabic. the long buttoned coat worn by clergy beneath the *abaya*.

Qom GHOM — City south of Tehran; the principal seat of Shi’a religious learning in Iran.

salavat sa-la-VAAT — Arabic. plural of *salāt*, blessing. The invocation of blessings on the Prophet and his household, called out collectively by a gathering as assent, applause, punctuation, and release.

sanad sa-NAD — Persian/Arabic. “document, deed, title.” Also, in scholarly usage, a cognate of *isnad* — the supporting chain.

sayyid saa-YED — Arabic. “lord, master.” A descendant of the Prophet through his daughter Fatimah. Marked by the black turban. The status can be inherited and cannot be conferred.

sofreh sof-REH — Persian. the cloth spread on the floor for a meal; by extension, a votive gathering laid out in fulfilment of a vow.

Shurabad shoo-raa-BAAD — Persian. “salt-place,” from *shur*, salty, and the suffix *-abad*, settled place. A common Iranian toponym; the town in this book is invented.

toman toh-MAAN — from the Mongolian tümen, ten thousand. The unit Iranians actually count in, equal to ten rials; the rial exists chiefly on paper and in the imagination of the state.

Uhud o-HOD — The mountain outside Medina, and the battle fought there in 625, in which the Muslims suffered heavy losses.

Vakilabad va-keel-aa-BAAD — District of Mashhad, and the name of its principal prison.

A career burglar walks out of a hospital in Mashhad in a dead cleric's coat, intending twelve days and a border. The turban is black. Black means descent from the Prophet. He has not faked a job — he has faked a bloodline.

Nine men meet the bus. They have been waiting eleven nights.

What follows is the account he wrote afterwards: forty numbered lessons from a man with no theology and one skill — reading a room — who discovers that the skill is the whole of the job, and that the good he does in the wrong clothes cannot be told apart from the good done in the right ones.

He invents scripture and watches it enter circulation. He falls in love and can conduct the affair only through liturgy, at four feet, in front of witnesses.

And one afternoon a girl gets off the morning bus, asking for the sayyid who signs things, and gives her name at the gate.

He took the clothes because they were on a chair and nobody was watching the chair. He did not look at the colour.

