

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 68



FILL IN THE BLANKS

جاهای خالی را پر کنید

C H E W Z

FILL IN THE BLANKS

جاہای خالی را پر کنید

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 68

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 979-8-952790-67-4

Roya Publications

Publication No. 68

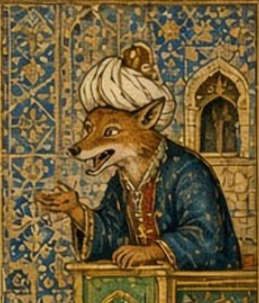
A book of the Delgoshā

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach



از کسب و کار و نیکوکاری و کفر و ایمان
 از کسب و کار و نیکوکاری و کفر و ایمان
 از کسب و کار و نیکوکاری و کفر و ایمان
 از کسب و کار و نیکوکاری و کفر و ایمان
 از کسب و کار و نیکوکاری و کفر و ایمان
 از کسب و کار و نیکوکاری و کفر و ایمان
 از کسب و کار و نیکوکاری و کفر و ایمان



SYNOPSIS

Manuchehr Delgoshā is forty-seven years old and is the most widely read unpublished writer in the Persian language. He has never performed, never had a byline, never had a book. He supplies. A satirical channel with two million subscribers, three stand-up comedians who each believe they are his only client, a state television programme that pays properly and takes his teeth out. By day he subtitles pirated American sitcoms, translating other men's punchlines into a language that will not hold them. By night, between three and five in the morning, in a chair with a broken caster, he takes dictation from something he does not care to name.

His younger brother took one of his lines on stage under his own name.

This is not a novel. It is a notebook: eighty-four entries, some nine pages long and some four lines, in the shape of a fourteenth-century treatise that has been censored in every edition printed since. There is no plot to speak of and nothing is resolved, which is the point. A man who can see the shape of a laugh before a room does, and who has not laughed himself in fifteen years, writes down what happens to him and what he says at funerals and what the dollar did this week, and leaves out the parts he cannot write.

The reader is expected to supply them.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

A laugh is not a decision.

I want to be precise about this, because the whole book rests on it. When something is funny, the diaphragm contracts before you have ruled on the matter. The intercostals go. A sound comes out that you did not authorise and cannot convincingly counterfeit. Every other response we have to the world can be performed — grief can be performed, piety can be performed, love is performed constantly and often sincerely — but a laugh is a report the body files without consulting you, and it is admissible, and it cannot be withdrawn.

Which makes a joke a strange object. It is a device built by one person to produce an involuntary event in the body of another. Where an opinion is expensive, it is the only sentence that can be transmitted without a sender, held without possession, and repeated by a man who would deny every word of it under oath. It has no author. That is its safety, and that is its cruelty.

Six hundred years ago a judge from Qazvin named Obeid Zakani compiled a book of them. He called it the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā*, the heart-delighting treatise, and it is a joke book, and it is also one of the more serious documents in the language. Nearly every edition printed since has had the obscene parts taken out and replaced with rows of dots. I have held one of these. The dots are not an absence. Any Persian reader can fill them in on the first attempt, because the rhythm tells you what is missing and the missing thing is always the same.

There is a kind of humour that some of us carry and cannot put down. It says the outrageous thing at precisely the moment the outrageous thing must not be said — at the graveside, in the ward, in the corridor outside the court. It is not bravery and it is not cruelty. It is closer to a reflex, and like a reflex it arrives before the person has been consulted. I have watched it in my own family for forty years, and I have never once seen it apologised for, and I have never once seen anybody able to stop it.

Something like it seems to be general among Persians. Whether that is the culture, or the century, or simply what a language does to people who have had to say everything sideways for a very long time, I do not know yet. This book is the beginning of finding out. It is what took me to the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā*, and to the books that come from it.

I have been thinking for some years about what it means to be able to do that.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. THE TRADE

II. THE WORKING LIFE

III. THE PATTERN

IV. THE BLANKS

V. STOP

I. THE TRADE

1.

A driver told me one of mine on Thursday, going north on Modarres in the sort of traffic where you have time to be told things.

He told it badly. He put the funny word third from last, which is where a joke goes to die, and he explained the setup twice because he did not trust it, and then he apologised for it before he got to the end, which is the single worst thing a man can do to a sentence.

I laughed in the correct place. I have been laughing in the correct place for so long that I am better at it than people who mean it.

Then I sat and rebuilt it in my head, moved the word to the end where I had put it in the first place, took out eleven syllables, and looked out of the window at a hoarding advertising a residential tower that will not be finished.

He said: my nephew sent me that one. He said it is going round.

I said: is it.

I tipped him more than the fare, which he took as generosity and which was in fact a licensing fee, paid late, in the wrong direction, by the wrong man.

2.

Vahid called at nine in the morning, which is the middle of my night, to tell me that the piece about the pension office was too long.

He said: Manu. It is too long.

I said it is forty words.

He said it is too long.

I took out six words. It went from forty to thirty-four and it became, unmistakably and immediately, better, and I lay in the dark holding the phone and hating him with a purity I have not achieved about anything else in my life.

Vahid is a *dallal* [da-LAAL], a broker. He does not write. He does not know how a joke is built and could not tell you why the six words had to go. He takes forty percent and he says *make it shorter*

and in nineteen years he has been wrong twice, and I remember both times, and I take them out and look at them the way other men look at photographs of the sea.

3.

There is a row of them on the pavement by the crossing, phones held at chest height, not calling out, not doing anything a photograph could be taken of.

Between them they know the number before the ministry does. Not roughly. Exactly, and about forty minutes earlier, and if you want to understand this country you should stop reading the newspapers and stand near those men for an hour.

I have a *sarrāfi* [sar-raa-FEE] I use, a proper one with a counter and a chair, run by a man who has never once been rude to me and has never once told me the truth about his margin. He is a professional. I would be insulted if he told me.

What I have never got used to is the arithmetic of the walk. From his counter to the corner is ninety metres. On a bad Tuesday in the autumn that walk cost me the price of a decent meal, and I did not do anything wrong, and neither did he, and nobody in the transaction was at fault, and the money was simply less by the time I reached the lamp post.

I have tried four times to build something out of that walk. It will not go. There is a joke in ninety metres and I cannot find it, and I have begun to suspect the reason is that it is not funny, it is only true, which is a distinction I have been having trouble with lately.

4.

The dollar went up again. My salary is now a historical document.

5.

He wanted to meet, so we met, in the café on Yousefabad where he always sits with his back to the wall like a man who has been in more serious trouble than he has ever been in.

He ordered for both of us without asking. He has done this for nineteen years. He orders correctly, which is the maddening part.

He explained the forty percent again. He explains it roughly twice a year, unprompted, and always as a kindness he is doing me. In his account of our arrangement, he carries the risk, he carries the relationships, he carries the burden of knowing my name, and I sit in a chair and receive gifts from the air. There is a version of this that is true and I am not able to say which parts.

In the trade I am Manu. Vahid has called me Manu for nineteen years and I do not believe he could produce the rest of it under pressure. The channel has me as Manu. The three men on television have me as Manu, and two of them believe this is a professional arrangement and the third has never asked.

My mother uses the whole thing. My father uses the whole thing. Payam once wrote M on the back of a receipt, which is the shortest anyone has ever got it down to, and which I still have.

Delgoshā means heart-opening. It is on my identity card and it was on my father's and on his father's, and it is an exact description of the work, and not one person who has ever bought that work has said it out loud.

He told me about the basement. Six of them, he said, all young, all fast, cutting the material into reels and pushing it out at four in the morning when the algorithm is hungry.

I said, four in the morning.

He said, they don't sleep.

I said, neither do I, and he laughed, because he thought I was being funny, and I was not being anything at all.

6.

Two hours today on a joke about a supermarket coupon.

There is no coupon here. There is no culture of the coupon, there is no small triumph of the coupon, there is no woman at a till with a folder of them holding up a queue. The joke is built entirely out of a thing that does not exist in the language I am putting it into, and

the network wants it out by Sunday, and it must be funny in Persian, and it must be twenty-two characters shorter than the English because the subtitle has to clear the mouth.

At one in the morning I found it. I will not write it down here. It is better than the original — genuinely better, sharper, and it lands on a Persian irritation so precise that anyone in this city would feel it in their teeth.

Nine hundred thousand people will watch that episode this year on a pirated file with my line in it, and not one of them will know that the American did not write it, and I will be paid the equivalent of two kilos of pistachios, and I will do it again on Tuesday.

from the Delgoshā

A qazi was asked which is the greater sin, to lie or to steal. He said, to lie. They asked him why. He said, because I have not yet discovered how to profit from it.

7.

Since people ask, and since nobody in this trade will say it out loud, I am going to set the whole thing down properly, in order, the way my father sets out his weights.

Twenty to eleven.

The chair first. Not a nice chair. It is the chair from my mother's front room, which I took in 2009 when she reupholstered, and it has a caster that came off in 2013 and that I have repaired four times, and every repair has been worse than the last, and it now sits at an angle of about four degrees that I have entirely stopped noticing except when someone else sits in it and says something. I do not let people sit in it.

The radio goes on at a volume where you can hear that a man is talking but not what he is saying. This is the correct volume for that station and I have said so to several people and none of them have found it funny, which tells you something about the joke and something about the people.

Then the bottle.

The bottle comes with a small plastic measuring cap. It holds five millilitres. It has little ridges on the outside for grip, as if the situation might become slippery, and a raised line inside marking a dose, and the whole object radiates a kind of institutional optimism that I have come to find touching. Somebody designed that cap. Somebody sat in a meeting and argued for the ridges.

I have never used it. Not once, in twenty years. I keep it in the drawer with the batteries.

Ten to eleven.

The taste.

I want to be fair to it. People assume it is sweet in an ordinary way and it is not. It is cherry, but cherry as an idea that was described to a chemist over the telephone by somebody who had eaten one in childhood. It is sweet the way a threat is polite. It arrives at the front of the mouth as fruit and leaves at the back as metal, and

there is a moment in between, about a second and a half, where it is

genuinely pleasant, and I have spent twenty years chasing that second and a half and it has never lengthened.

They reformulated it in 2017. I maintain that this was a more serious national decline than the currency, and unlike the currency it was never explained, and unlike the currency nobody was blamed. The old one had a body to it. The new one is thin and slightly floral and I have written to no one about this because there is no one to write to.

Five to twelve.

Nothing.

This is the worst part and it is always the worst part. For an hour there is nothing at all, and during that hour I become entirely certain that it has stopped working — that I have finally reached the tolerance I have been promised by four separate people, that this is the night the trade ends, that I will have to find out at forty-seven what I am like.

I have had this conviction, by a conservative estimate, seven thousand times.

It is the most reliable emotion I possess. I trust it more than I trust hunger.

Twelve minutes past midnight.

The nose.

Nobody tells you about the nose. Every account of this that I have ever read or been given talks about warmth, or ease, or the famous business of the shoulders coming down. What actually happens first, invariably, before anything pleasant has occurred, is an itch on the bridge of the nose.

Not a metaphor. An itch. A specific and locatable itch, about a centimetre above where glasses would sit, and it arrives like a bailiff turning up before the good news.

Then the forearms. Then the scalp, which is worse, because you cannot scratch a scalp with any dignity.

So the picture is this: a man of forty-seven, alone, at midnight, in a crooked chair, in a room where a radio is saying something, scratching his own head like a dog, waiting to become the funniest person in the Persian language.

I have written four jokes about the itch. None of them work. I know exactly why none of them work and it is not for want of trying: **an itch has no third beat**. It arrives, it is unpleasant, it stops. There is no turn in it. You cannot build on a thing that does not develop, and I have wasted, at a rough estimate, nine hours of my life establishing this.

Half past midnight.

Now the warmth, and I will try to earn it.

It starts at the breastbone. Not the stomach and not the head — the breastbone, dead centre, and it goes outward from there like something poured slowly onto a flat surface. Shoulders, upper arms, then the back of the neck, then, last and best, the small of the back.

The important thing about the warmth is not that it is pleasant. The important thing is that **it has opinions**.

It thinks everything is going to be fine. It thinks the rent will be manageable, that my mother will live another twenty years, that the work is good, that there is time. It holds these views with total confidence and it is extremely persuasive, and in twenty years it has never once been right about anything.

Half past one.

The false start.

Everything is funny now. This is not the third hour; this is the counterfeit of the third hour, and I fall for it about half the time. I write eleven jokes in forty minutes and I am delighted with all of them.

In the morning they are the same joke. Every time. Eleven versions of one observation that was not funny in the first place,

deteriorating in quality as they go, and somewhere around the eighth the handwriting starts to go, and the ninth is usually a single word.

Last month the ninth was the word *lift*, written four times, with an underline.

I have a folder for these. It is called The Bribe. I do not delete them, which — and I have thought about this — is the behaviour of a man keeping receipts for a business he claims not to be running.

Two o'clock, roughly.

The nod.

Not sleep. Chin down, notebook sliding off the knee, ten or fifteen minutes of being somewhere without being anywhere, and then up again, with a line on the cheek from the seam of the chair.

And I should say here, because the body keeps its own accounts and sends them whether or not you open them, that twenty years of this has turned my digestion into a ministry. I make submissions. They are acknowledged and then not acted upon. There is a delay of indeterminate length, an appeals process I do not understand, and a department that does not answer correspondence. Twice a year there is a sudden and unannounced reversal of policy with no warning and no apology and a great deal of disruption, and then we go back to the previous arrangement, and nobody is held responsible.

I am describing my bowels. I am also, and I want this noted, describing something else.

Three o'clock.

Everything above is preamble.

The room goes quiet. Not silent — quiet, the way a house goes quiet when somebody competent arrives. And then something sets a joke down in front of you. Complete. Built. The funny word already in the last position, the setup already stripped, the turn already sitting where it needs to sit.

Your only job is to write it out before it gets bored and leaves.

You do not build it. I want to be exact, because this is the thing nobody in the trade will say: **you take dictation**. Every man who does this work knows the feeling and not one of them will admit it, because the moment you admit it you have conceded that you are not the author.

You are the room the joke happened to walk into.

Twenty to five.

Cold. The chair is a bad chair. The radio is a man talking.

I read what I have written and it is good — I can tell that it is good the way you can tell a wall is straight — and I feel nothing about it whatsoever.

Then I go to bed at the hour my neighbours are getting up to stand in a queue for something.

8.

Read The Bribe this morning while the tea went cold.

Eleven entries from Tuesday. Same joke eleven times. The observation is that the man who runs the shop at the end of the street addresses everyone as *engineer*.

It is not funny. It has never been funny. It is not even true — he addresses me as engineer, which is different, and the difference is where a joke would have been if I had been sober enough to find it.

I did not delete them.

9.

My mother called to tell me about Mrs Farvardin's gallbladder.

She is not a funny woman. She would be offended to be called one. What she does is describe things exactly as they occurred, in order, at length, to whoever is present, and she does not know when to stop, and the effect is devastating.

She got as far as the daughter-in-law bringing soup to the hospital in a container that was not the right container, and describing the container, and then describing the moment when everyone in the

room understood that it was not the right container and that nothing could be said about it, and I had to put the phone on the arm of the chair and hold my hand over my mouth.

She said: Manuchehr? Are you there?

She said: why have you gone quiet.

I told her the line was bad.

Fifteen years I have not laughed, and I am aware — I am extremely aware — that the one person who has ever come close is a woman in her eighties describing a soup container, who has no idea what she is doing, who has never in her life told a joke, and who would stop immediately if anyone explained it to her.

So nobody is going to explain it to her.

from the Delgoshā

A man said to the preacher, my son is dead and I cannot stop weeping. The preacher said, weep — God counts every tear. The man said, and what does He do with them? The preacher said, He counts them.

10.

When I was seven, everybody was Esteghlāl [es-tegh-LAAL] or Persepolis. It was not a preference. It was a fact about you, like a blood group, and it was established early and it was not revisited.

I tried. I want that on the record. I watched the ball for most of a season, all the way through, honestly, and the ball is boring.

The ball is boring because the ball is where two hundred thousand people are already looking. There is nothing to find there. Everyone has found it. Whereas in the middle of all that there is one man who has to keep making decisions, alone, in public, at speed, with no time and no help, and be hated for every single one of them by half the ground no matter which way he goes.

That is the interesting job. That is the only interesting job on the field.

My father asked me at dinner which team I supported, in the way a man asks a question to which he already knows the answer, and I said: the one with the whistle.

He did not laugh, because he does not, and he did not ask what I meant, because he never has. He took it entirely at face value, which is the only way he takes anything.

On Friday he came home with a whistle. A real one, brass, from the sports shop on Ferdowsi. He told me later that he had looked at three and that this one was the best made.

I am forty-seven. It is in the drawer with the batteries and the measuring cap.

11.

The pharmacy man asked after my mother today, by name, and then told me his daughter has been accepted at Amirkabir.

He is the kindest person I deal with. He has never once made me feel like what I am. He remembers things about my family that I have told him in passing years apart and assembled without being asked to.

He took the shop over in 1399, from a man who retired to Rasht.

I have known him eleven years. He is the closest thing I have to a friend.

I am putting that down because it is true and because I have no intention of thinking about it.

12.

The man who sells me the tunnel also sells followers, and in the spring he sells answers.

I want to be fair to him: he is the only genuinely dishonest person I deal with, and he is therefore the most respected man in my address book, because you always know where you are with him, which is nowhere, and he has never once pretended otherwise.

The followers are ten thousand for a price that has changed four times this year. They arrive over three days so it looks natural. They are not people. Three of them liked something of mine in February and I looked at their pages and they were all the same photograph of the same beach at three different resolutions.

The answers are the serious business. Every spring, for about six weeks, he is unreachable.

I asked him once what he does with the money and he said, without any performance at all, that he puts it into gold and that his daughter is at Sharif and does not know what he does.

I said: what does she think you do.

He said: computers.

He said it entirely straight, and it took me until I was on the stairs to understand that it was the best line I had heard that month, and that he had not been trying, and that if I had laughed he would not have known why.

13.

At nineteen I found my school file, and in it, in a doctor's handwriting that was not a doctor's, was the name of a disease.

The story is this. I was eleven and the examination asked for the causes of the Constitutional Revolution and I wrote four pages on why the question was badly worded. Not incorrectly — the four pages were, I have since confirmed, entirely correct. But the question wanted five causes in a list and what it got was a boy explaining that three of the five were the same cause wearing different clothes.

They called my mother in.

She has told me since that she had no plan whatsoever, that she walked down the corridor with nothing in her head, and that at the door she heard herself say: my son has a condition.

The teacher asked what condition.

And my mother, who has never lied about anything of consequence in her life, invented a disease on the spot. It had four syllables and an *-osis* on the end and she delivered it in the voice of a woman quoting a specialist in Vienna, and she did not blink, and the teacher wrote it down.

It stayed on my file for six years.

And she maintained it for all six. That is the part. She did not let it lapse. She produced symptoms when asked. She adjusted the prognosis as I got older, so that it developed in a plausible direction. In the spring of my fourteenth year she reported a setback, movingly, to a headmaster, and secured me three weeks of something I did not know I was getting.

She never told me. I found the file at nineteen and read it standing up in a corridor.

It is the funniest document I have ever read, and I have read two million forwards, and I have never told her, and I never will, because the moment she understands what she has been doing she will stop.

14.

(2019, a room in Karaj, forty people, biggest laugh of the night:)

He's the only one in the family with a fixed address.

15.

Bought nail clippers on the metro from a man who did not need to sell them to me.

I already had nail clippers.

II. THE WORKING LIFE

16.

Bought the notebook from the shop under the flyover, the one with no name, where a man sells stationery out of what was a garage.

He has been there twenty years. He does not have a sign. He does not need a sign. Everybody within a kilometre knows there is a man under the flyover who has the good paper, and this arrangement has survived two currencies, a pandemic and a war, and it will survive me.

17.

I was nine at my cousin's wedding, in the far room, with four hundred people and not enough chairs.

An uncle started a story. I do not remember which uncle and I do not remember the story. What I remember is that about four sentences in I knew how it ended.

Not guessed. Knew — the way you know a stair is there in the dark, with your whole body, before you have thought about it.

So I waited. I ate rice and I waited, politely, for about ninety seconds, and then the room went off exactly on the beat I had known it would, four hundred people at once, and my aunt put her hand flat on the table, and a man near the door had to lean on the wall.

And I felt nothing.

Here is the part that took me two years. I assumed at first that everyone else had also known. I thought that was what a laugh was: a courtesy. I thought all these adults had seen the ending coming the way I had, and had laughed anyway, out of good manners, to give the uncle his moment. I found this rather beautiful. I remember thinking that people were kinder than they looked.

I was eleven before I worked out that they genuinely had not seen it coming. That the ending had arrived at them from nowhere, that their bodies had been taken by surprise, and that the surprise was the entire mechanism, and that this was what everybody meant by funny.

I can see the shape of a laugh before the room does. That is the gift. And the seeing is what kills it, in me, permanently, in advance.

They are not two things. They have never been two things. There was never a version of me that had the one and not the other, and I have stopped resenting this, roughly, in the way you stop resenting your height.

18.

Every minister in this country holds the same qualification. He was available.

The form says *reason for application*. I have written *the form*.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked a dervish what separates a joke from a
confession. He said, an audience.*

19.

Mr Sarabi from the fourth floor died and I went, because you go.

I want to describe what happens to me at a funeral, because people assume it is that I am irreverent and it is not that at all.

What happens is that I cannot get into the room. Everyone else is in the room. They are inside the thing, being sad, being useful, holding cups. And I am four feet above it counting beats. The mullah's rhythm is wrong and I know how to fix it. The woman on the left has been building to something for twenty minutes and will not land it. The nephew has a genuinely good line and is going to waste it on the wrong audience. That is what I am doing. That is all I am ever doing.

Someone said, near me, that Mr Sarabi is in a better place.

And I said, quietly, to a shoulder: he's in Behesht-e Zahra [be-HESHT-e zah-RAA]. Section 27. I've been. There's no parking.

Nobody heard it except a boy of about fifteen who was standing where I did not know he was standing.

He went. Completely. He got about four seconds of trying to hold it and then he had to leave, and I watched him go out through the doorway with his shoulders going, and then I watched an older man follow him out, and through the window I watched the older man speak to him in the courtyard for some time.

I did not go out. I could have gone out and said it was mine. I have thought about why I did not and the honest answer is that I was still watching the room, because the room had changed temperature when he left, and I wanted to see how long it would take to come back.

It took ninety seconds. That is a long time. I wrote the number down when I got home.

20.

I started the first one at ten and it was not jokes.

I wrote down things adults said that were not true.

Not lies. Nobody was deceiving anyone. These were the sentences that come out of people on their own, without anybody choosing them, the way a hinge makes a noise.

Come by whenever you like.

You've grown.

May your hand not hurt.

I'll call you tomorrow.

He's like a brother to me.

I was not accusing anybody of anything. I want to be clear about that, because at ten I was not capable of an accusation. I simply thought it was wonderful. I thought it was the best thing I had ever noticed about people — that a language can run for hours with nobody driving, and that everyone in the room can hear it running, and that it works, and that something real gets done.

Three notebooks in four years. My mother threw two of them out in a move and I have never mentioned it.

It occurs to me now, and I set it down without comment, that a book of short observations about the distance between what a man says and what is the case is a *resāleh* [reh-saa-LEH], and that I would not hear the name Obeid Zakani for another eleven years, and that when I did I sat down on the floor of a shop.

21.

My father still goes to the shop. He sold it in 2011.

22.

The woman on the fourth floor teaches *konkur* [kon-KOOR] six days a week to boys who will not get in and to four a year who will.

She is the best teacher in this district. I know that the way you know a wall is straight. I have heard her through the floor for eleven years — the same six weeks of material, the same three explanations of the same problem, each one better than the last, refined over eleven years into something you could publish.

She cannot afford this district. She has a flat in this district because her husband's mother had a flat in this district and died in it, and if that had not happened she would be teaching the best mathematics in Tehran from somewhere in Pakdasht at four in the morning by telephone.

There is nothing funny in this entry and I have looked.

23.

There is a man who works the line between two stations with nail clippers, cables, insoles and socks, and he is better than I am.

I have been studying him for three years, which is a thing I have not said to anyone, and here is what he does.

He has six minutes. He knows he has six minutes. He starts talking about eight seconds after the doors close, which is precisely long enough for the carriage to have finished rearranging itself and not long enough for anyone to have got their phone out properly.

The hook is a complaint. Always. Never the product. He complains about something in the carriage — the heat, the announcement, a man's bag — and it is a real complaint, correctly aimed, and forty people agree with him inside four seconds. He has bought the room before he has mentioned that he is selling anything.

Then three beats, and they escalate properly, and the third one is always about money and always self-deprecating.

Then the callback, and this is where he is genuinely first-rate, because he times it to the tunnel. There is a stretch of about nine seconds where the noise comes up and you cannot hear well, and he does not fight it. He goes quiet. He lets the tunnel have it. And when the noise drops he is already saying the callback into the silence, and it lands twice as hard because everybody has been waiting nine seconds to hear again.

I have never seen a professional do that. I have seen professionals get destroyed by a passing motorcycle.

Then the close, on the doors, and he moves down the carriage while people are still deciding, so that the buying happens behind him, which means nobody has to be seen deciding.

And then he does it again. In six minutes. To an entirely fresh forty people.

Every comedian in this country is finished by the same thing, and it is not the Ministry. It is arithmetic. You can fill a room twice, maybe three times, and then you have run out of city, and you must write an entirely new hour, and no one can write an hour that fast forever. That is what ends them. Not the censor. Subtraction.

This man solved it by accident, at some point, for socks.

He does not know that comedy is a thing a person can be paid for. I have thought about telling him. I have thought about it for three years.

24.

My aunt owns three freezers. There is food in one. The other two are savings.

from the Delgoshā

*A merchant complained that his scales were false.
They asked whether they weighed heavy or light.
He said, that depends entirely on which side of the
counter you are standing.*

25.

My mother sets monetary policy at breakfast and she is better at it than the central bank, and I want to put the evidence down rather than the claim.

She holds gold. *Sekkeh* [sek-KEH], the coins, and some half-coins, and a quarter that she keeps separately for a reason she has never given. They are not in a bank. They are not in the house in any place that a person would look, and I do not know where they are, and my brother did not know either, and if she goes suddenly this family will spend a week taking up floors.

She has never bought at a peak. Not once, in fifty years. I have checked this. I sat down two winters ago with the dates she gave me, which she produced from memory, in order, with the prices, and I checked them against the record, and she has been within four percent of the bottom on every purchase since 1979.

She cannot explain how. I have asked. She says: I buy when it is quiet.

I said: quiet how.

She said: when nobody is talking about it. She said she has done it eleven times.

That is the whole method. That is the entire model. It is also, and I noticed this about eleven seconds after she said it, exactly how I decide when to send Vahid something, and I have never told her that, and I never will, because she would tell the neighbours and then everyone would know how it is done.

26.

Friday at my parents'.

I bring the new material. I have brought the new material on a Friday for twenty-six years.

My father takes the pages and puts on the glasses and reads every line. Not skimming. He reads it the way he reads a certificate — all the way to the bottom, and then back to check something in the middle, and then to the bottom again. It takes him a long time.

Nobody talks while he does it. My mother goes on with what she is doing in the kitchen and does not comment on the arrangement, which has been in place for twenty-six years and has never been discussed by anybody.

Then he puts the pages down, and squares them, and says something like: this is good work.

He does not laugh. He has never laughed. He does not have the organ. I do not mean that he is cold — he is not remotely cold, he is the warmest man I know — I mean that the faculty is simply not present, the way some people cannot smell. He knows this about himself. He told me once, when I was about thirty, in the car, apropos of nothing: *I know I am missing it. I do not know what it is that I am missing.*

I bring the pages anyway.

My mother served the rice and told us about the man at the bakery who has started wearing a tie, and described the tie, and described the bakery's reaction to the tie over the course of a fortnight, and my father said *hm* twice, and I had to look at the wall.

27.

In 1989 my father took me on a job.

He calibrates industrial scales. He has done it since 1978. He walks into a bakery, a scrapyard, a pharmacy, a poultry wholesaler, with a wooden case of certified weights, and he establishes whether the world in that room is telling the truth about how much things weigh.

The case is lined with green felt and the weights sit in recesses cut to their shapes, and they go in ascending order, left to right, because that is the order they go in. There is no argument about this. He has never once put them back in a different order to see what happened, because it would not occur to him that anything would happen.

The job was a scrapyard in the far south of the city, and it was August, and I was nine, and I was there because my mother had

somewhere to be.

He set the case down on a bench and opened it and began laying them out.

And I said:

That one is a kilo everywhere in the world.

That is the line. I have it exactly. Nine words, and I meant them entirely seriously — I had just understood, standing in a scrapyard in the heat, that there was a thing in a box that meant the same everywhere, that could not be argued with, that did not change depending on who you were or what year it was, and I was trying to say so.

My father laughed until he had to sit down.

He sat down on an oil drum. He was holding a two-hundred-gram weight and he had to put it on the bench because he could not hold it. It went on for the better part of a minute. It was a sound I had not heard before and have not heard since, a rasping, helpless, embarrassed sound from a man who does not have the organ, in a scrapyard, on a Friday, at nothing at all.

Afterwards, in the car, I asked him what had been funny.

He said: I don't know.

He said it apologetically. He looked at the road and he said it the way you would say it about a nosebleed.

Thirty-six years. Two million forwards. Rooms of four hundred, and channels of two million, and three men on television who have never met me. I know precisely how a joke is built, I know why the six words have to go, I can tell you to the syllable where a laugh will land and how long a room takes to come back.

And I have the transcript of the only laugh I ever wanted, and I have taken it apart more times than anything I have ever written, and there is nothing in it.

No structure. No turn. No third beat. The funny word is not even last — the funny word, if there is one, is *kilo*, and it is fourth from the end, which is where a joke goes to die.

It is the one piece of evidence I possess that the whole thing cannot be engineered.

I keep it where I can see it.

28.

He lost the left side. It's fine, he was never going to use it. He voted with the right.

29.

Took a car home at two, which I do not do, because it was raining and I had a bag.

The driver was a doctor. Nephrology. He drives four nights a week and he was completely without self-pity about it, which made it worse.

At some point he glanced at me in the mirror and said, not unkindly, *how long have you been on the codeine.*

I said, I'm sorry?

He said the thing about the voice, and the thing about the skin around the eyes, and then he told me — in about ninety seconds, driving, in traffic, without notes — exactly what it was doing to me, in what order, and roughly how long I had before the order stopped mattering.

He was correct in every particular. Including two things I had not told a doctor because I had not wanted to hear them said.

He did not tell me to stop. That is the thing I keep coming back to. He laid it out and then he let it sit there and then he asked whether I wanted the window down.

I tipped him what I could and I did not say anything, and I have thought about him more in the last four months than I have thought about most people I know.

30.

Under a flat in Punak there are eleven machines on a subsidised meter, wired off an extension cable, in a room where the family used to keep the rice.

The son showed me. He is twenty-six and he has the manner of a man conducting a tour of a facility. He has a name for the arrangement of the fans. He has a spreadsheet, and the spreadsheet has nine rows, one to a machine. He described his margins to me with total candour and the margins are appalling, and he knows the margins are appalling, and he is not going to stop.

The heat is the thing nobody tells you about. That room in July is not survivable for a person and they have to go in there anyway, in shifts, to reseal a card or unplug something, and they come out grey.

I asked him what he would do if the power went properly.

He said his father says the same thing, and then he did an impression of his father saying it, and the impression was good — the timing was good, the pause before the last word was in the right place — and his mother laughed in the doorway, and I stood in a hot basement at eleven at night and watched a family who are going to lose all of this be funnier about it than three men I have on television.

31.

There is a photograph in the second drawer.

The frame is one of those brass-coloured ones from the shop on Vali Asr that everybody bought in the nineties, and the backing card has come away at one corner, so the picture sits about two millimetres lower than it should on the left.

I have been meaning to fix that for six years.

from the Delgoshā

*A man was famous in his city for his wit and was
buried without a name upon the stone. His friends
said, he would have found this funny. They were
correct, and it did him no good whatever.*

32.

Went to the basement in Sattarkhan.

Six of them, exactly as advertised, none of them nineteen, laptops on a folding table and a rug that somebody's mother had contributed. Extension cable to a socket in the corridor. It smelled of instant coffee and warm plastic.

They did not know who I was. Vahid had not told them and I did not tell them, and I stood at the back for forty minutes and watched six children take my work apart and put it back together for a format I do not understand and will never use.

They were good. That is the thing I was not prepared for. The cutting was good. The girl doing the captions had an instinct for where to break a line that I would have paid for.

One of them — Sara, or Sahar, I did not catch it properly — noticed me looking blank at something on her screen and turned round and explained a joke to me.

Patiently. Kindly. Slightly slowly, the way you would for an uncle.

She explained the joke to me and I said thank you.

My landlord raised the rent sixty percent that month and apologised for it. I said don't apologise. You're the only man in Iran hitting his targets.

33.

There is a man at the passport office who is fourth in the queue at half past five in the morning and who has never applied for a passport.

He is holding the place. He will sell it to you at about eight, when the desperation has come up to price, and he will hand over his position with a small formal nod as if transferring a title deed, and then he will go and get into the other queue.

I have watched him do it twice. He does not haggle. He names a number and waits, and the number is correct, and I have never seen anyone walk away.

He is providing a real service to real people at a fair price and I cannot decide whether he is the most honest man in that building or the least, and I have concluded that this is not a question the building is equipped to answer.

34.

They took four zeros off the money. It is the only reform delivered on schedule in fifty years, because it was subtraction.

A hundred thousand toman [to-MAAN] used to be money. Now it is a tip. In four years it will be a unit of nostalgia.

III. THE PATTERN

35.

The rent went up in Farvardin, in Tir, and again in Aban. It has stopped being a rent. It is a subscription to the concept of a rent.

They opened a new tower on the hill with a fountain in front of it. There is no water in the district on Wednesdays.

36.

A funeral in Shahrak-e Gharb, a colleague of a cousin, a man I had met twice.

I said the dialysis line. I said it to a heavy man in a grey jacket who was standing at the tea urn and who had been looking at me with that expression people get when they suspect they have met you.

Three times a week they take the blood out, clean it, and put it back. Only institution in this country that returns what it takes.

He laughed so hard that the woman pouring had to steady the urn.

He is on dialysis. Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, four years.

He wiped his eyes and gripped my arm above the elbow and thanked me. He actually thanked me. He said nobody says anything about it, ever, that everyone changes the subject, and that he had not heard a single word said out loud about the thing that is happening to him in four years.

I went home and sat in the chair without the bottle for a while.

Because here is the only rule in this trade that has never once failed me: **the joke is always safe with the person it is about.** It is the people beside them who cannot take it. The man with one leg will laugh. His sister will not speak to you again.

I have known that for twenty years and used it for twenty years and I have never worked out whether it is the best thing about my job or the worst thing about me.

37.

The minister says the economy has turned the corner. He does not say which way we were facing.

38.

My uncle in the bed by the window, in the good hospital, which means the one where the lift works.

He asked me whether he would see Nowruz.

Everyone in that room had spent four days constructing an elaborate architecture around that question. My aunt had a whole route mapped out through it. The doctor had a form of words. My cousin had started answering questions that had not been asked, which is what people do.

I said: you'll see it. You just won't be in a position to enjoy the herbs.

The room stopped. I want to be accurate about the room: my aunt made a sound, my cousin stood up and then did not have anywhere to go and sat down again, and someone in the corridor who had heard it through the door came and stood in the doorway to see what kind of family this was.

My uncle laughed for about four seconds. Then he took my hand, which he had not done since I was a child, and held it and did not say anything, and we sat like that for some minutes while the room went on being appalled around us.

I counted the beats. The whole time. I could not stop counting the beats. Four seconds of laugh, and then a silence I would have cut by half, and then my aunt coming in too early with the tea, which killed it, which is what tea is for.

He died in Bahman. He did not see it.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the physician why he laughed at the
bedside. He said, the alternative is to be of use.*

39.

The good hospital is the one where the lift works and it costs what it costs.

The family sat in the corridor doing the arithmetic that every family in this country does in a corridor, which is not arithmetic about medicine, it is arithmetic about which relative to telephone and in what order and how much can be asked of each without it becoming a permanent thing.

My cousin did the calling. He is good at it. He has a voice he does it in.

At about ten he came back and sat down and said, to nobody: we are four short.

And an hour later we were not four short, because a man none of us had seen for nine years arrived and put an envelope on the chair and left before anybody could stand up.

That is also this country and I do not have a joke for it and I have not tried to build one.

40.

Something came through at twenty to four.

A forward, four hands deep, no source. A photograph of a municipal sign in a provincial town, misspelled, with a caption that was not funny and a second caption underneath from whoever had forwarded it that was less funny.

I do not know why I kept it. It is not the sort of thing I keep. There was something in the wrongness of the spelling — it was wrong in a way that made it a different word, and the different word was almost, but not quite, an accusation.

Saved it. Went to bed at ten past five.

41.

He said: make it shorter.

42.

It came at three on Sunday and it is the best thing I have written this year.

I am not going to set it down. That is not modesty; it has earned three separate people money and one of them is on television. What I will set down is that it took ninety seconds, that I did not build it, that it arrived complete with the turn already in position and the last word already in the last position, and that I wrote it out at speed with the pen my mother gave me and then sat looking at it.

It is about a sign.

I did not have a sign in my head on Sunday. I had not thought about signs. I had not thought about that town, which I have never been to, or that word, which I did not know had a second meaning until the joke told me it did.

The whole thing was there. All I did was hold the paper.

That is the third hour. That is what I stay in the chair for and what I have paid for with a ministry in my gut and a doctor telling me at two in the morning what order it goes in.

It is very good. Vahid sold it in a day. He said, and I am quoting him: *this one you did not need to shorten.*

43.

Went back through the notebook this evening looking for something else.

Entry of the twenty-first, twenty to four: the sign.

Entry of the twenty-third, three in the morning: the joke.

Forty hours.

I put the two pages side by side on the table under the lamp and I sat and looked at them for a while, and then I wrote the number 40

in the margin with a circle round it, and then I put the notebook back on the shelf.

There is nothing to do about it. It is a coincidence, and it is the kind of coincidence that is not even interesting — I trawl four hundred forwards a night, I keep perhaps six, one of them was always going to turn into something. That is the process. That is what the process *is*.

Also the joke is good, and it has been paid for, and the money has been spent.

44.

They gave the water ministry to a man with a degree in theology. Which is correct. We are going to need prayer.

45.

They have promised the gas will be restored by the weekend. They did not say which weekend and the sentence, read carefully, does not contain one.

46.

Friday. Rice, and the herb plate, and my father reading every line. She sets four places.

from the Delgoshā

*A king asked his jester for the truth. The jester
gave it. The king laughed for some while, and then
had him taken out, and both of these were sincere.*

47.

I went to a ministry this week to apply for a licence I do not require.

I am not going to pretend I know why. I had the morning, and I had the form, and there is a certain kind of day where standing in a queue for a document you do not need feels like the only honest activity available.

Four generations of knowing someone, that is the qualification here. His father knew someone, his father's father knew someone. At that point it is a dynasty and we should at least get a palace.

They have built a ramp. Concrete, correct gradient, handrail on both sides, and somebody signed off on it and somebody was paid for it and it is a genuinely good ramp.

It is behind a locked gate.

I stood and looked at it for a while. It is the most honest building in Tehran. Everything that is wrong here is wrong in a way that requires explanation, and takes four ministries and a decade, and cannot be photographed. This can be photographed. A man built a way in and another man locked it, and both of them did their jobs, and the file is closed.

The man at the window was not unkind. That is what I want to record about him. He was tired in the specific way of a person who has explained something four hundred times before eleven o'clock, and he explained it to me for the four hundred and first time, correctly, and he could not help me, and he knew he could not help me before I had finished the sentence, and he let me finish the sentence anyway.

That is a kindness. It cost him forty seconds he did not have.

48.

I asked what the fine was for. He said for asking.

49.

There is a man on Amir Kabir who repairs things that are not repairable.

Not appliances — appliances are a normal trade. He repairs the parts inside appliances that are sold as sealed units and that the manufacturer will tell you cannot be opened. He opens them. He has tools he has made himself for opening them, and he has a wall of drawers containing components salvaged from machines that died in 2003, and he can keep a German washing machine alive for eleven years past the point at which Germany has stopped acknowledging that it exists.

He is seventy. He has no apprentice. I asked and he said the young ones will not sit still long enough, and then he corrected himself, unprompted, and said that was not fair, and that there is no money in it and they are right.

When he goes, several thousand machines in this city will become rubbish on the same afternoon.

50.

The phone says the storage is full.

It has said this for eleven months. There is a photograph of a receipt I no longer need, four hundred forwards I will never open, three versions of an audio file somebody sent me of a song, and eleven seconds of a voice note from June of 2019.

I have not deleted anything and I have not played anything and the phone continues to tell me, twice a day, that there is no room.

51.

Reza got the certificate through in the spring. Two years after the bus.

It is a good certificate. Embossed. It has a number on it and a stamp and it establishes, formally, in the archive of the Republic, that he is entitled to a thing he has not yet received and about which nobody can give him a date.

He put it on the table and said: what do I do with this.

I said: you're one leg down and one document up. In this economy that's called breaking even.

He laughed for a long time and then he stopped laughing before I expected him to, and I saw it happen, and I did not have anything for the gap, and we sat there.

That is the risk. Everybody thinks the risk in this work is the Ministry. The risk is the four seconds after, when the thing you have built has done its job and gone, and the room is exactly where it was, and now they are all looking at you.

from the Delgoshā

*A scribe was ordered to copy out a book and to
leave from it whatever was unfit. He copied it
faithfully and left out and was paid
twice.*

52.

State television ran a programme on managing household costs. It was cut off by a power failure. Best-produced thing they have ever made.

53.

Three this week.

A forward on Sunday, a joke on Tuesday. A conversation overheard in the pharmacy on Wednesday and a line on Thursday that used a word from it I had not used in ten years. And the third one I am not going to write down, because writing it down is what I want to talk about.

I have started a second notebook.

I did that without deciding to do it. I bought it at the shop under the flyover, a different size and a different colour, and I put the coincidences in it, and it went in the drawer and not on the shelf.

And then I sat and thought about the fact that a man who keeps his ordinary notes on a shelf and his suspicions in a drawer has already reached a conclusion he has not permitted himself to state.

The notebook is information. The notebook is more information than anything in the notebook.

I am going to keep it anyway.

IV. THE BLANKS

54.

A fourth one, on Thursday.

I am not going to describe it. I will say only that the gap was thirty-six hours this time rather than forty, and that I noticed the gap before I noticed the joke, which is new, and which I do not like.

55.

I want to write down the eleven seconds, because they are the only part I have any claim on.

It came in on a Tuesday afternoon, from a number I did not have, four hands deep, no source. It was a clip. Bad audio, a phone held at chest height, a basement somewhere with a curtain behind and about sixty people on plastic chairs.

A young man on a low stage. The frame cuts his head at the top.

He does eleven words and the room goes up.

And for eleven seconds I did not know it was mine.

That is what I want on the page. Eleven seconds in which I was a man watching a clip. In which I thought: that is well built. In which I thought: he has put the funny word last, which almost nobody does. In which I thought, with the particular pleasure of a tradesman seeing good work, *whoever wrote that knows what he is doing.*

Eleven seconds of being an audience. The only eleven seconds of it I have had since I was nine years old at a wedding.

And then I knew it was mine, because I had written it in the chair in February and given it to nobody, because it was about our family and it was not for sale.

And then, about a second after that, I knew whose voice it was.

Then the eleven seconds were over and the other thing started, and the other thing has not stopped.

I have watched the clip since. I have watched it more than is reasonable. The picture is bad enough that you cannot see him properly, which is fortunate, and the sound is good enough to hear

the room, which is not.

He performs it well. He puts his hand out at the end, on the last word, which I would have told him not to do.

56.

The lift has been broken since the funeral. He would have found that funny. He lived on six.

57.

Vahid came to the flat.

He has never been to the flat. In nineteen years we have met in cafés, in the street, twice in a car, and once outside a hospital, and he has never had the address and I do not know how he got it.

He brought food. Two bags. Rice, herbs, a stew in a container, bread, and — because he is who he is — four packets of the biscuits I like, which I have never mentioned to him and which he has therefore observed.

He did not mention money. He did not ask when he would have anything. He did not say *make it shorter* and he did not say anything about the work at all.

He put the bags on the counter and he stood in my kitchen for about six minutes talking about a road closure, in detail, with the wrong details, badly.

Then he said he had to go, and he went.

Neither of us has referred to it since. He was on the phone at nine the following Tuesday about length.

I have not decided what to do with the fact that the man who takes forty percent of everything I make is the only person who came.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the mourner why he had not wept. He
said, I And they wrote
down that he had wept.*

58.

He was not on the line all week.

I rode it four times, at the hours he rides it, and it was a woman with hairclips on Tuesday and nobody at all on Thursday.

I do not know his name. I have never known his name. There is no one to ask and no way to ask and no reason that anybody in that carriage would have noticed the difference, and I stood holding the rail on Thursday thinking about the fact that a man can work a route for eleven years, forty times a day, in front of two thousand people a shift, and simply not be there, and the route continues, and the tunnel is the same length.

He was back on Monday with insoles.

59.

My mother called from the corridor and described it.

The floor is the pale green they used in the seventies. There is a queue that is not a queue, it is four queues that have agreed to look like one. There is a man selling tea from a flask out of a bag, which is illegal in the building, and everybody buys from him including the guards. There is a fluorescent tube at the far end that has gone, so the corridor is bright at one end and not at the other, and everyone waits at the bright end even though there are more seats at the dark end, and nobody has said anything about this to anybody, it has simply been agreed.

She described the tea man's flask. She described what he does with the cups.

She was not being funny. She has no idea. She was telling me where she had been all morning because I asked her where she had been all morning.

And I wrote it down.

I want to be exact. I did not write it down afterwards. I took the pen off the arm of the chair while she was still speaking and I wrote *four queues that have agreed to look like one* on the back of an envelope, and I was already moving the words around before she

got to the fluorescent tube.

She finished. She asked whether I had eaten.

I said yes.

Then I sat in the chair with the envelope for a long time and the tea went cold, and I did not use it, and I have not used it, and it is still on the shelf where I can see it, and I am aware that not using it is not the same as not having taken it.

60.

He is seventy-six and he still does two or three a month, because they call him, because there is nobody else in the city who does it properly.

The case is the same case. Green felt, gone shiny in the recesses. There are eleven of them and they sit in ascending order, left to right, and each one has its number stamped on the underside and its certificate in a folder in the boot of the car, and the certificates have to be renewed, and the renewal is itself a calibration, because a thing that measures must be measured, and there is a mass in a vault in France that everything eventually stands on.

He explained this to me when I was eleven and he has explained it to me perhaps forty times since. He does not remember that he has explained it. He explains it the way other men ask after your health.

What he does is this. He walks into a bakery, or a scrapyard, or a poultry wholesaler, and he puts a known thing on their scale and he sees what the scale says. That is the entire job. He establishes whether the world in that room is telling the truth about how much things weigh.

Forty-seven years of it. I have never once heard him raise his voice about a false reading. He does not think of the men as thieves. He thinks of the scale as tired.

I went with him on Tuesday to a place off Khavaran, and I carried the case, which he let me do, which he did not used to.

At the third weight he stopped and held it and said the thing about France.

Then he said: your mother is not sleeping.

Then he did the fourth weight.

And I understood, standing in a cold room among a great deal of scrap metal, that this is how it is going to be discussed, if it is discussed, ever, and that this was the whole of it, and that I was being told something and also being told that there would be no more.

He has not said my brother's name aloud since the Tuesday of the clip.

He is not avoiding it. I have watched carefully. There is no gap where the name would be, no swerve, no substitution. He has restructured his sentences so completely that a stranger listening to him for a month would not know he had another son.

A man who has spent his life establishing whether things are what they claim to be.

We did four premises and I bought him a sandwich and he told me the material was good work.

61.

I went home from Khavaran and got the notebook down. Not this one. The one from when I was ten, the one about the things people say, the only one of the three my mother did not throw out.

I was looking for something else. I have forgotten what.

On the fourth page, in a hand I can barely credit was mine, the word eleven appears four times.

Eleven times my aunt has said she will call. Eleven men outside the mosque. Eleven of the pigeons. Eleven, and then a word I cannot read, and then a full stop.

None of them are counts. I know they are not counts because I know what I was doing at ten — I was writing down what people said, not what was there — and because there were not eleven pigeons, there is no version of that courtyard with eleven pigeons in it, and because a boy who has counted something writes the

number he counted and a boy who has not writes the number he has.

So I went through this one. The notebook on the shelf, kept by a man of forty-seven who does this for a living.

Eleven jokes in the folder. Eleven years with the man at the pharmacy. Eleven pairs of socks. Eleven of them at the barrier at the airport. Eleven days with the lamp on. Eleven forms.

I have never once counted any of it.

Then I sat and tried to account for it, properly, the way my father would go down the case. It is not my birthday. It is not the flat, or the floor, or the street. It is not a shirt number — I have never had a shirt. It is not the year of anything and it is not the age of anyone and it does not belong to a person that I can find.

I asked my mother on Friday. I did it obliquely, because she does not like to be asked things directly and because I did not want to explain what I was asking.

She said: eleven what.

And I could not finish the sentence, and she went back to the kitchen.

There is a reasonable explanation for this, which is that everybody has a number they reach for, that mine is eleven, that a man of forty-seven has been saying it for thirty-seven years without hearing himself, and that this is the least interesting thing about me.

I do not think that is the explanation. I would like it to be.

I have put the old notebook on the shelf beside this one and I am not going to look at it again for a while, because there is work, and because a man who spends an evening establishing that he does not know where his own number came from has had a worse evening than he intended.

62.

In the phrase *his leadership*, the literary device is personification.

63.

He was on the line on Thursday and he had socks.

I bought two pairs. Black, which is what he had, and which I do not need. That makes eleven.

We had the conversation about the price of socks, which we have had eleven times and which has changed each time in the direction you would expect, and he told me what he pays and what he used to pay and what the man in Gomrok told him about the spring, and I asked the right questions and he answered them, and it took the whole distance between the two stations, and at the end he did the close on the doors.

He has never asked me what I do.

I have never told him what he is.

That is the arrangement and I would not change it for money.

64.

It moved eleven percent in a day in Mordad and the whole city stood still and looked at its phone.

I was in the bakery. It is the only time in my life I have seen that bakery quiet. Nine people in a queue, none of them talking, all of them holding a phone at the same angle, and the baker also holding his, and the bread going past the point where it should have come out.

Then a man near the front said something.

I did not catch it. That is the part I want to record. I was four back and there was a noise from the ovens and I missed it, and the whole queue went — properly went, all nine of them and the baker, and a woman had to put her hand on the counter.

Best laugh I have witnessed in three years and I do not know what caused it.

I asked the man behind me what he had said. He said he had not heard it either. He had laughed anyway, because the queue laughed, and he said this without any embarrassment at all, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, which it is.

I walked home with the bread and thought about the fact that I have built a career on the belief that the sentence causes the laugh.

65.

They say the young are leaving. They are not leaving, they are being exported. It is the only successful non-oil export we have, and nobody is taking credit for it, which tells you it is working.

from the Delgoshā

*A man went to the and asked for
. He was given a receipt.*

66.

Four hours of electricity on Monday and I sat with my mother in the dark until the fridge came back on.

She said: it is like the war.

I said: in the war we knew when it would end.

She said: no we didn't.

I said: exactly.

And nobody laughed, and it was not a joke, and I have been trying since Monday to work out what it was.

It has the build. It has three beats and the third one is short and the last word is in the last position. If you gave me that on a page I would tell you it was finished and I would send it to Vahid and he would sell it by Thursday.

It is not funny. It is correct.

I do not have a word for the difference and I have been at this thirty-six years.

67.

I have the Tehran edition, the one with the grey board covers, and I have the smaller one from Qom with the introduction that apologises for the author.

There is an anecdote on page one hundred and four of the grey one, in the Persian section, four lines, about a man and a debt and a witness.

I know it.

I do not mean that I have read it before, although I must have, I have had that book for twenty years. I mean I know it the way you know your own handwriting on an envelope in a drawer. I mean that when I read the second line I knew the fourth, and not the way I know the end of an uncle's story — the way you know a room in the dark.

It is in the Qom edition too, on page ninety-one, with one word different.

He died in 1371.

I have checked twice and I am not going to check again.

68.

If you like working remotely, the best job in the country is at the top. Nobody asks where you are, what you are doing, or whether you are alive.

69.

The bank sent me a statement. It is a work of imagination and I have kept it.

70.

The Kazemis' boy went on Sunday and I went to the airport because his mother asked me to come, and I do not know why she asked me and I went.

Eleven of them by the barrier, and the mother doing the thing where she is fine, entirely fine, right up until she is not, and the father who has not said a word since Karaj holding the passport wallet as if it will be needed again.

The boy was — I want to get this right — the boy was *embarrassed*. That is what nobody puts in the films. He was twenty-three and he was leaving forever and he was embarrassed by his mother in an airport, exactly as he would have been at nine, and part of him was already through the barrier and part of him was calculating whether the bag was over.

I did the export line. The whole thing, properly, with the pause before *non-oil*.

They all laughed. Every one of them, hard, for longer than it deserved, the way people laugh when they have been holding something for two hours.

He laughed hardest.

He was still laughing when he picked up the bag, and he went through the barrier laughing, and he turned round once at the top of the ramp, and that is the last thing his mother has of him and I gave it to her.

I do not know what to do with that. I am not being modest and I am not fishing. I genuinely do not know whether that was the best thing I have ever done or a piece of thieving.

71.

On the back of the receipt, in pencil, in his handwriting: *4 eggs, oil, ask M about the thing.*

The receipt is from a shop on Jomhouri that closed in 2020. It was for a phone charger. Eighteen thousand toman.

I have not asked what the thing was because there is no one to ask.

from the Delgoshā

..... *said, . .*
..... *And the*
..... *were satisfied.*

72.

My savings and my father's memory are declining at the same rate.
At least with my father we know the cause.

V. STOP

73.

The man under the flyover has raised his prices and apologised, and shown me the invoice from his supplier, unprompted, to prove that he is not making more than he was.

He is making less than he was. I did the sum on the pavement.

I bought two notebooks.

74.

The clip is eleven seconds.

The voice note is eleven seconds.

I have twenty-two seconds of him and I was not in the room for either.

75.

We do not have a currency. We have a patient. I check the rate the way other men check on a sick relative.

76.

I built one on Thursday that cannot be sold.

I want to describe the construction, because it is the only piece of engineering in this notebook that I did entirely myself, awake, at four in the afternoon, on tea.

I put the funny word in the middle. Not near the end and not at the end — the middle, buried, with four syllables of nothing after it, so that the ear goes past it before it can do anything.

I put the turn in the first line, so that there is nowhere to go.

I removed the third beat. There are two beats and then it stops, and stopping on two is like coming down a stair that is not there.

And I made it about something that only I have any information about, so that there is no room in it for anybody else to stand.

By every metric I own it is not funny. I have thirty-six years of metrics and it fails all of them and I checked each one separately,

twice, the way my father goes down the case.

And I love it. It is the only thing I have written that I love.

The test is simple. If I send it and it dies, then everything before it was mine, because the difference between that and the others is only my hand. And if I send it and it moves — if a thing built expressly to fail moves anyway — then I would like to know what has been happening in that chair for twenty years.

I have not sent it.

It is open on the table. It has been open on the table for eleven days. I keep the lamp on it.

77.

The form says *reason for application*. I have written *the form*.

78.

They have announced a committee. The committee is to determine why the previous committee did not report.

79.

Friday.

She did the rice with the crust, which she does when she wants something and does not know that she does it. There was the herb plate and the yoghurt with the shallots that I do not like and have eaten every Friday for forty years without mentioning.

I brought the pages. He put on the glasses. He read every line, all the way to the bottom, and then back to check something in the middle, and then to the bottom again, and nobody talked while he did it, and my mother went on with what she was doing in the kitchen and did not comment on the arrangement.

He squared the pages and put them on the arm of the chair and said: this is good work.

He did not laugh.

She told us about the tie at the bakery, which has now been going on for five weeks and has developed, and the development is that the man's brother has also started wearing one, and she described the brother's tie, and she described the difference between the two ties, and my father said *hm* twice, and I had to look at the wall.

Four places.

I have not eaten that well in a month and I said so and she said I am too thin and my father said the material was good work, again, at the door, holding my arm above the elbow, which is a thing he has started doing.

80.

He said it first. He was seven.

I have been telling it for forty years and I have never once said whose it was, and this is the last page of the notebook where I can put that right, so:

.

.

.

.

.

81.

The bakery has started selling the bread in halves. Nobody asked for halves.

from the Delgoshā

.....
.....
.....

82.

I have written *the form* on eleven forms now and nobody has ever queried it, which is the joke, and it took me four years to notice that the joke was not the answer.

83.

He said: make it shorter.

84.

The one with the whistle.

GLOSSARY

Behesht-e Zahra be-HESHT-e zah-RAA — Persian. the paradise of Zahra. Tehran's principal cemetery, in the far south of the city; the largest burial ground in Iran.

Dallal da-LAAL — Arabic via Persian. broker, middleman. A fixer who takes a percentage on any transaction: cars, flats, hospital beds, a place in a queue.

Dast-forush dast-fo-ROOSH — Persian. hand-seller. A street or transit peddler working without a licence or a fixed pitch.

Delgoshā del-go-SHAA — Persian. heart-opening. Cheering, delightful. Also a family name, and the title of Obeid Zakani's fourteenth-century collection of anecdotes.

Ershād er-SHAAD — Arabic via Persian. guidance. Shorthand for the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which licenses published and performed material.

Esteghlāl es-tegh-LAAL — Arabic via Persian. independence. Tehran football club; historically the blue half of the city.

Konkur kon-KOOR — from the French concours. The national university entrance examination.

Nowruz now-ROOZ — Persian. new day. The Iranian new year, at the spring equinox.

Payām pa-YAAM — Persian. message.

Qazi ghaa-ZEE — Arabic. judge. In Obeid Zakani's anecdotes, a standing figure of venal authority.

Resāleh reh-saa-LEH — Arabic via Persian. treatise. A short prose work on a single subject; in religious usage, a jurist's manual of practice.

Resāleh-ye Delgoshā reh-saa-LEH-ye del-go-SHAA — The Heart-Delighting Treatise. Obeid Zakani, mid-fourteenth century: a collection of short anecdotes in two parts, Arabic and

Persian, satirising judges, preachers, physicians and the conspicuously pious. Extensively obscene, and bowdlerised in most editions printed since, the omissions marked with rows of dots.

Sarrāfi sar-raa-FEE — Arabic via Persian. money-changing. A currency exchange; also the informal pavement trade in rates.

Sekkeh sek-KEH — Persian. coin. The gold Bahar-e Azadi coin, held as a store of value.

Tomān to-MAAN — the Iranian unit of account: ten rials. Prices are quoted in toman regardless of what is printed on the note.

Zakāni, Obeid o-BAYD zaa-kaa-NEE — c. 1300-1371. Persian poet and satirist from Qazvin, educated in Shiraz. Author of the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā*, of *Akhlāq al-Ashrāf* (Ethics of the Aristocrats), and of *Mush-o-Gorbeh* (Mouse and Cat), in which a cat makes a public repentance and eats the mice who come to congratulate him.

Manuchehr Delgoshā is the most widely read unpublished writer in the Persian language.

He has never performed and has never had a byline. He supplies. By day he subtitles pirated American sitcoms. Between three and five in the morning he takes dictation from something he does not care to name.

He is funniest at deathbeds, at funerals, in the corridors outside courts. He has not laughed himself in fifteen years.

His younger brother took one of his lines on stage under his own name.

*The dots are not an absence.
Any reader can fill them in.*



FROM THE DELGOSHĀ
ROYA PUBLICATIONS

