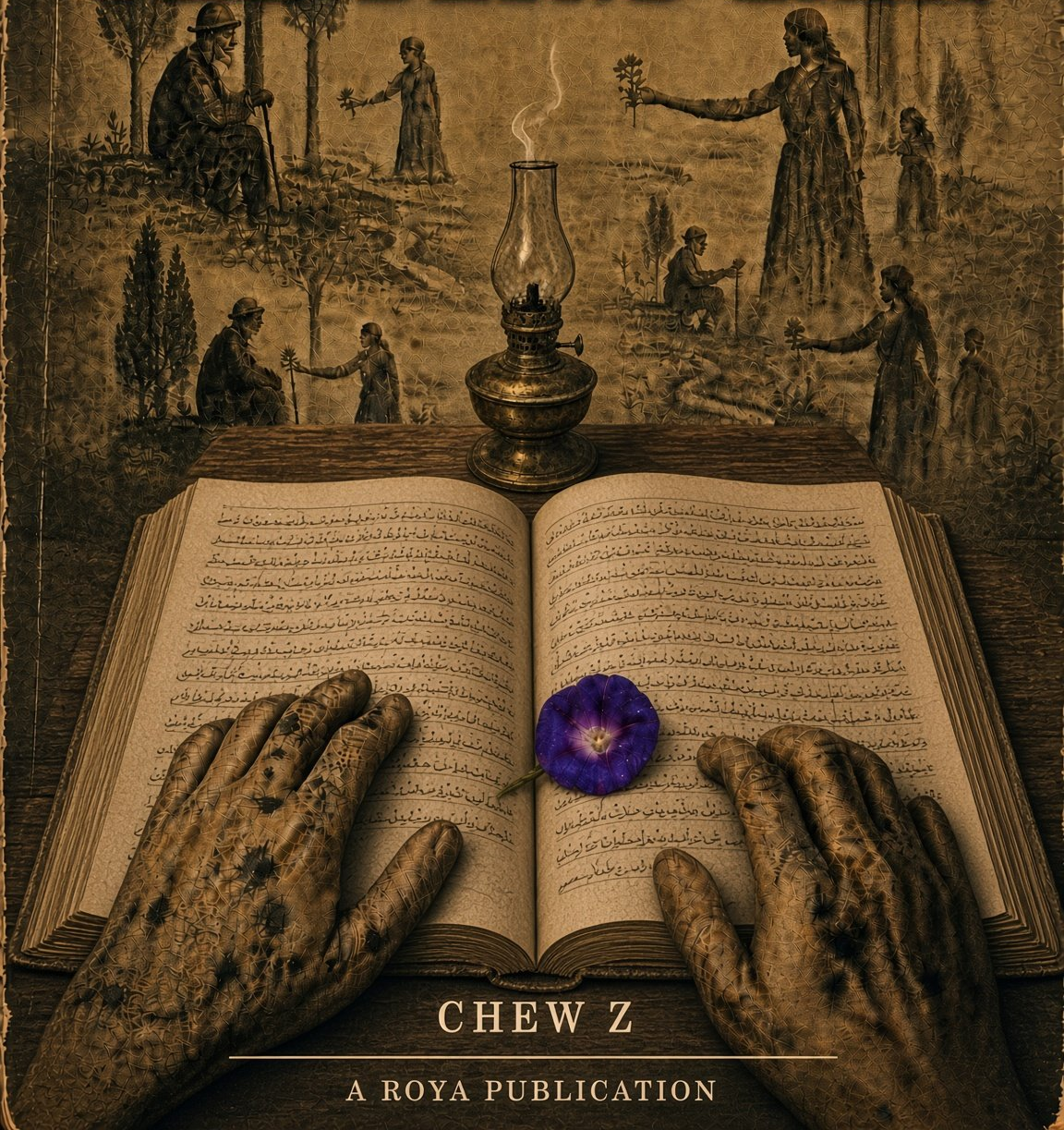


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 69

چراغ کور

THE BLIND LAMP



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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چراغ کور

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 69

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

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ISBN 979-8-952790-68-1

Roya Publications

Publication No. 69

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

A black and white portrait of a man with dark hair, a mustache, and round glasses. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. The portrait is centered at the top of the page.

به یاد صادق هدایت

in memory of Sadegh Hedayat, 1903–1951

who wrote the book this one could not exist without, and who understood — before almost anyone in his language — that the mind does not confess in a straight line. He gave grief no exit and no explanation, and called it honest instead of cruel. This book is an argument with him, made only because his was worth having.



SYNOPSIS

He has spent fifteen years looking for a grave he dug himself.

Mahmud Sarshar makes pen cases nobody wants, in a house nobody visits, in a city that has rebuilt itself around him without asking. His wife died on a night he cannot remember and buried somewhere he has never found. His only company is a stranger's banned novel — fifty copies, printed in secret, stamped not for sale or publication in Iran — annotated in the margins, in his own hand, in years the opium took from him.

Or so he believes.

A noir of grief, addiction, and one small colour a man has not been able to see for fifteen years — inspired by, and in dialogue with, Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*.

The answer was never hidden. He simply could no longer see the colour of the truth.

HOW THIS BOOK IS BUILT

In 1936, in Bombay, a man printed fifty copies of a novel by hand and stamped each one: not for sale or publication in Iran. Five years later a Tehran newspaper printed the same novel, in pieces, on the back page, and the country read it and did not know what to make of it. It is still the most famous book anybody in Persian has failed to understand.

One of those fifty copies came into my house.

What follows is my account of the seven years that book describes, which are the seven years of my marriage, and of the night my wife died, which the book also describes, and which I have never been able to hold in my mind for longer than it takes to say a sentence about it.

I have set it down in three kinds of writing so it cannot get away from me again.

FROM THE BOOK is what is printed in the copy.

WHAT HAPPENED is mine.

FROM THE MARGIN is what is written in the white space around the print, in pencil and in ink, in my own hand, in years I do not remember well.

I have arranged them so that the reader can see, on the same page, what a thing was and what it turned into.

— M. S., Tehran, Farvardin 1330

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CHAPTER ONE — THE COVERS

Tehran, Farvardin 1330 · April 1951

WHAT HAPPENED

My wife has been dead for fifteen years and I do not know where she is buried.

I want to be clear about that at the start, because most of what comes after is complicated, and that part is not. She died on the thirteenth of Farvardin in the year 1315. I took her out of the city that night. I came back the next morning with dirt in the creases of my hands and dirt in my ears and no memory whatsoever of the ground I put her in.

I am not being poetic. I mean that between the hour I left the house and the hour I came back, there is nothing. Not a dark place. Not a blur. There is a stretch of my life the length of a working day in which I was awake, and talking, and driving a horse, and digging, and I was not there.

Fifteen years is a long time to look for one grave. I have a list. I will come to the list.

My name is Mahmud Sarshar. I chose the second part myself, in 1298, when the government said we all had to have one and gave us a week to think about it. I was twenty-one and I picked Sarshar, which means brimming over, which means full to the top. I have thought about that boy a great deal. He walked to a table in a municipal office and told a clerk that his family, going forward, would be the family of a man who has more than he needs.

I make pen cases. Ghalamdans. You build them out of paper — twenty, thirty layers of it, pasted and pressed and dried and shaved until it is harder than wood and lighter than a spoon — and then you ground it and you paint on it and you varnish it eleven times, and each coat has to dry a day, and on the twelfth day you have made an object that a man will use to carry two reeds and a knife.

Nobody wants them. They have not wanted them since I was young. A pen case is for a man who writes with a reed, and the men who write with reeds are dying at a rate of about one a week, and the

ones replacing them buy a fountain pen from a shop on Lalezar and put it in their coat.

I still make them, because the dealer still takes them, three or four a season, and pays me for two.

Here is the thing about my pen cases, and I would rather say it plainly than let it be discovered.

For twenty years I have painted the same picture on every one.

It is not a decision. There is a girl's face in the middle of my sight, and it does not go away when I close my eyes, and it does not go away when I look at a wall, and every face I have looked at since 1315 has been wearing her eyes. Not resembling them. Wearing them, the way a man wears another man's coat, badly.

I went to a doctor about it in the second year — the one on Sepah. He was younger than me and he was kind and he had a phrase for it, which I have kept the way you keep a receipt. He said: the eye holds a thing after the thing is gone. He said it happens to some men who smoke, and to some men who are hit on the head, and to some men for no reason anyone can name, and that in most of them it passes.

I asked him how long. He said that in most of them it passes.

I asked him again and he looked at his desk and said that he had read of a case that lasted nine years, and that he was sorry, and that I should stop smoking, and would I like to talk about my wife.

I said no.

That was 1317. He would be an old man now. I do not know if he is alive. I never went back, which I regret, because he was the last person who asked me a question and waited for the answer.

I do not want the reader to think this is a book about a haunting. It is not.

What happened to my eyes has a name and a cause and it is in a book of medicine somewhere in Europe with a Latin word attached to it. What happened to my wife has a name too, and I have spent fifteen years unable to say it, and this account is my attempt to say it.

Those are two separate problems and I ask that they be kept separate. When I tell you that a man came up the road with a hearse and two horses and took me to a place I cannot find, I am not asking you to believe in ghosts. I am telling you what I saw. What I saw and what was there have not been the same thing for a very long time and I know it, and I have known it since 1317, and knowing it has not helped me even slightly.

Now the book. In the winter of 1314 a man named Ardeshir came to my workshop with a parcel. He was a Zoroastrian from Yazd who worked for a printing house and went twice a year to Bombay for type and paper, and I had done a pen case for his father, and he liked me, and every time he came back he brought me something that had cost him nothing.

That time it was a novel. Not printed — stencilled, a hundred and forty pages of it, run off by hand, and bound in grey paper. On the first leaf someone had put a stamp: not for sale or publication in Iran.

Ardeshir thought this was very funny. He said a Tehrani had it made in Bombay because no one at home would touch it, fifty copies, and he had been given one by a clerk who could not read Persian and did not want it in his room.

I put it on the shelf over the varnish and I did not open it.

Zivar read it in two nights.

I remember her on the third morning sitting with her hands flat on the table on either side of it, the way you hold down something that might move, and I asked her what it was about and she said, a man who is very sick and cannot say what is wrong with him.

I said, that sounds cheerful.

She said, it is the only book I have ever read that is not lying.

She was twenty-five that winter. She had sixty-nine days to live and both of us knew it and neither of us had said it out loud, and I have gone over that morning more times than I have gone over any other morning of my life, looking for the place in it where I could have put my hand out.

The margins came later.

I want to explain this carefully because it is the hinge of everything and I do not want the reader confused.

The copy has wide margins — stencilled pages always do, they leave room for the frame — and every one of those margins is full of writing. Small, fast, very regular, in pencil in some places and in ink in others. It runs down the outside of the page and turns the corner and finishes along the bottom. There are perhaps four hundred separate passages. Some are two words. Some go on for a page and a half and continue on the next leaf with a little arrow.

They are in my hand.

I know they are in my hand because I have compared them to my ledger and to the back of my licence and to a letter I wrote to the dealer about a delivery, and the letters are shaped the same way, and the ha has the same lean, and the numbers are mine.

I do not remember writing a single word of them.

That is not as strange as it sounds. Between 1315 and about 1320 I was smoking eight or nine times a day and I was not keeping track of anything. Whole seasons of that time are gone. I know I ate, because I am alive. I know I worked, because there are pen cases from those years with dates on the underside in my writing. I know I wrote in the margins of that book, because there they are. So what I have is this: a novel about my life, written by a stranger, annotated by me, explaining it.

I read the margins the way another man reads the newspaper. Every day, some part of it. They are how I know what happened. They are more reliable than my memory because my memory has been in the same room as the opium for twenty-five years and the margins have not.

When something in this account is written FROM THE MARGIN, that is what it is. It is me, from the years I lost, telling me now.

I have got used to it. You do get used to it.

In 1320, in the summer, a newspaper began printing the novel on its back page in pieces.

I found out on a tram. Two men in front of me were arguing about it — one of them said it was filth and the other said it was the first real thing anyone in this country had written in four hundred years, and they went at it for six stops, and I sat behind them with my hands in my lap.

I bought the paper at the corner and I stood in the street and read it and the passage was wrong.

Not changed. Short. Whole sections were simply not there — the parts that explained things, the parts that said what the pictures meant. I read it three times and then I understood, or I thought I understood, that the newspaper had been given a cut version, or had cut it themselves for space, and that somewhere between Bombay and the back page of a Tehran daily somebody had taken the sense out of it. I wrote to them that night.

The letter went to a sub-editor named Hushang Aram and he answered it, which I did not expect, and said politely that the text they were printing was the text they had been given and that he would look into it.

I wrote again. He answered again.

I have written to that man perhaps two hundred times in ten years. He has answered perhaps a hundred and sixty. He has never once been unkind, and he has never once said the thing that any reasonable man would have said in the second year, which is that the passages I keep asking about are in the margins of my own copy, in my own hand, and that no newspaper on earth was ever going to print them.

I want to be honest that I know this now. I knew it, in some fashion, by about 1325. I kept writing anyway. He kept answering. Twice a year he sends a note at Nowruz.

He is the only person who writes to me. I am aware of how that sounds.

The list.

There are eleven places I could have taken her. I worked them out over the first two years, from the hours, from the state of the horse,

from what a man can do in a night with a spade, from the ground on my shoes.

Rey is where you take a body. It has been where you take a body for two thousand years. The ground out there is nothing but people. I have been to nine of the eleven. I go on a Friday, on the first of the month when the weather allows, and I walk the rows and I read what is legible and I dig, in one or two places, where the ground looks disturbed and old, and I have found nothing at all, nine times.

There are two places left.

One of them is a strip along the eastern wall at Ebn-e Babuyeh where they put the poor and the unclaimed, which is unmarked, and which is the size of a wheat field.

The other one I am not going to write down yet.

I have not gone to either of them in three years. I could give reasons. The true reason is that when the list is finished I will have nothing left to do on a Friday, and I will still not know, and I do not believe I would survive the following Saturday.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator, at the opening. He is describing the pen cases he paints.

I paint the same picture on all of them. Always one picture. An old man sitting under a cypress tree, wrapped up, biting the nail of his finger, and across the stream a girl in black leaning toward him, holding out a morning glory. There is always a stream between them.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 3, outer edge, in ink.

You will want to know why it is always the same one. It is not a mystery and you are going to make it into one anyway, because a mystery is easier to live in than an illness. You will read this more times than you have read anything.

The stream is not a symbol. There was a stream. You know exactly where it was and you will pretend for years that you do not.

CHAPTER TWO — THE NARROW GOOD YEARS

Tehran, 1309-1311 · 1930-1932

WHAT HAPPENED

Her father bound books. That is how it started — he had a shop off Nasser Khosrow with a press in the back and a smell in it that I have never smelled anywhere else, glue and leather and the paper dust that comes off a trimmer, and I went there in the spring of 1309 because I needed twelve sheets of a particular card for the ground of a commission and he was the only man who had it.

She was at the front counter doing the accounts.

I want to be careful here, because a man of fifty-three writing about the first time he saw his wife at twenty-four will lie without meaning to. So: what I noticed was not her face. What I noticed was that she was writing very fast and not looking at the page, and that the column of figures coming out from under her hand was as straight as if it had been ruled.

I said something stupid about it. She said, without stopping, that anyone can write straight, it is reading that is difficult, and had I come about the card.

We were married in the autumn.

She had been at school until fourteen and then not, because her mother died and there were two younger ones, and she never once complained about it in seven years, and she never once let anyone in a room forget that she could read. She read constantly. She read the things her father took in for binding, which meant she read at random and enormously — a treatise on horse ailments, a schoolbook of French, somebody's dead uncle's diary, four volumes of Amir Arsalan, an English catalogue of pumps. She would come home from a day at the shop and tell me about pumps for an hour.

I had, at that time, an income and a trade and a workshop with a good north window, and no education past twelve, and handwriting like a man kicking a wall.

That is not an exaggeration and it turned out to matter.

A pen case is not sold by a man walking around with pen cases. It is sold by letter. You write to a household, you write to an office, you write to a merchant who has heard of you, you write your terms and your dates and your prices, and if the letter is ugly the man on the other end concludes — correctly, in the general case — that the work will be ugly too.

For six years, Zivar wrote my letters.

Not dictation. She would ask me what I wanted and go away and come back with it done, and it was always better than what I had said. She wrote my terms in a way that made me sound reasonable, which I am not. She wrote my accounts. She wrote to the varnish man in Isfahan who cheated me and stopped him cheating me. She signed my name at the bottom, in my name's own shape, and I let her, and neither of us ever thought about it twice.

I have perhaps forty of those letters. The dealer kept his and gave them back to me in 1318 when he heard, in a bundle tied with string, which was the single kindest thing anybody did in that decade. She bought her ink from a stationer two doors from her father's shop. It came in a small bottle with a metal cap and it cost less than the ordinary kind because nobody else used it. I asked her once why she didn't just use what everyone used and she said —

She said: because this way I always know which pages are mine.

I have thought about that sentence for fifteen years without once understanding it.

The two good years were 1309 and 1310 and I did not know at the time that they were the good years, which I am told is normal, and which I have never forgiven myself for.

What was in them:

She sat in the workshop while I worked. Not helping. She had a chair by the north window and she read and she talked at me, and I laid varnish, and a coat of varnish takes about forty minutes to lay and a day to dry, so we had forty minutes a day of me not being able to look up, and that was when she said the true things. I have noticed since that people tell you the truth when you cannot look at

them. Everything real she ever said to me, she said to the back of my head.

She was funny. This is the part I cannot get onto the page and it is the part that matters most. She was funny in the specific way of a person who has been in rooms where she was not allowed to speak, which is to say she was very quick and very quiet and she would say one thing, once, at the level of a person commenting on the weather, and you would have to go back to it an hour later and take it apart.

She disliked my work. Not the craft — she thought the craft was extraordinary — but the objects. She said a pen case was a beautiful box for a thing that was going out of the world, and that I would be the last man in Tehran making a very good version of something nobody would use, and that this was a sad way to spend a life.

I got angry about that. Once, properly. I said some things.

She waited until I had finished and then she said: I am not saying stop. I am saying know what you're doing.

I have thought about that sentence for fifteen years too, and I understand it perfectly, and I wish I did not.

In Ordibehesht of 1311 she was five months along and the child was born dead.

There is nothing to say about it. Everyone in that generation had one. Her mother had two before Zivar. It was a Tuesday and there was a woman who came and then a doctor who came late and there was blood on a mattress that we burned in the yard and the smell of that was in the house for a week.

She was in bed for nineteen days.

She was in pain after that and the pain did not stop when it was supposed to. That is the whole of it. It was not a mystery and it was not a punishment and I do not want it treated as one. Something inside her had been torn and had healed wrong, and it hurt her constantly, in the lower back and down the left leg, and it hurt her worse at night, and there was a doctor on Sepah who said an

operation and there was a doctor near the bazaar who said no operation and a third who said the first two were thieves.

The operation was three hundred tomans. I want to put down what three hundred tomans was, because a number in a book is nothing. It was more than I made in a year. It was the workshop, the tools, the stock, and the north window, sold. Her father offered a hundred and fifty of it and did not have a hundred and fifty.

We talked about it for eleven months. She was against it. She said the man near the bazaar was right and she would be cut open for nothing. I think now — I am nearly certain now — that she said that because of the number, and that she would have said it whatever the doctors said, and that I let myself be persuaded by an argument I knew was about money.

That is the first thing in this account that is actually my fault. There will be others. I would rather they were counted properly.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator, on his wife's illness and his own.

All my life I had known there was a wall between us, and I had gone on talking through the wall, and now the wall had begun to answer.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 41, along the bottom and up the inner edge, in ink.

She said no to the operation.

You are going to keep the receipt of that conversation for the rest of your life and take it out and show it to yourself, and every time you show it to yourself you will read it as her decision.

It was not a conversation between a woman and a doctor. It was a conversation between a woman and a number, in a room with a man who owned the number and did not put it on the table. You were not cruel. That is the part you will never get over. You were only careful, and it cost her everything, and there is no word in the language for what you were.

CHAPTER THREE — THE FIRST PIPE

Tehran, 1312 · 1933

WHAT HAPPENED

I have to explain something about opium to a reader who may be young, or may be foreign, or may be reading this in some year when things are different, because if it is not explained then the rest of this book will look like the story of a criminal and his victim, and it is not that.

In 1312 in this city, opium was ordinary.

It was a government monopoly. The state grew it, the state sold it, the state took the tax, and the tax was a serious portion of what the country ran on. There was a shop. You went to the shop. There were old men in my street who had taken it every evening for forty years and got up in the morning and went to work and were buried at eighty-two by children who thought of them as sober men.

I started at twenty-eight, in company, the way you start. It was in the room the way tea was in the room. By 1312 I had been taking it every evening for six years and I did not consider myself a smoker any more than a man who has bread with dinner considers himself a baker.

That is what I believed. I want it on the page in the tone in which I believed it, because that tone is the whole crime.

She was in pain for eleven months and I watched it.

I want to describe the watching, because people who have not done it think it is sad, and it is not sad, it is something else. It is being in a room with the person you love and having a job — the job of getting her to the morning — and failing at that job every night for eleven months while she is polite to you about it.

She stopped sleeping in about the fourth month. She would go down at nine and be up at eleven and then she was up. So I was up. We had a system where I would make tea at two and she would talk, because talking helped, and by Khordad she had told me every single thing that had ever happened to her, and had started again from the beginning.

By the ninth month she had stopped being funny. That was how I measured it. Not the crying — she almost never cried — but that the quick quiet thing she used to do had gone out of her, and a person who is in pain for long enough is not in pain, they are just smaller.

She got a look. I would come into a room and she would put the look away and be pleasant, and I could see her doing it, the way you see a man straighten up when the foreman comes in.

I do not know how else to say this. I could not stand it.

On a night in the middle of Mehr, 1312, I took the tray into the bedroom.

I did not agonise about it. That is the thing. There was no scene in which a man wrestles with himself at a doorway. I had been up for three hours, and she had that look, and I was in the other room with my own pipe in my hand, and it occurred to me the way it occurs to you to fetch a blanket for somebody.

She said, Mahmud, no. I said it was for the pain and it was one time and half of what I take, and that the doctors were thieves, which was the sentence I had ready.

She looked at the tray for a while.

Then she said all right, and held out her hand for it.

Here is what I have to tell you, and it is worse than any of the rest of it.

It worked.

She slept for six hours. She woke up and came into the workshop and sat in her chair by the north window and she was funny again, that morning, about a customer's letter, and I was laying a coat and could not look up and I stood there with a brush in my hand and my eyes going and I thought: I have fixed it.

I want that recorded exactly. Not I have done something dangerous that seemed to help. I thought: I am a good husband and I have fixed it.

The best morning of my adult life is the morning after the first pipe I gave my wife, and I did not find out for two years that it was the worst thing I ever did, and I have never been able to get those two facts to sit in the same head.

After that it goes quickly, and I am going to write it quickly, because writing it slowly would be a kind of dishonesty — it did not feel like a descent, it felt like an arrangement that was working. Mehr: once, at night, for the bad nights.

Aban: most nights.

Azar: every night, and a little in the afternoon on a bad day, and we both called the afternoon one the extra, and we had a joke about it.

Bahman: she asked me to leave the tray where she could reach it, so as not to wake me, and I thought that was considerate of her.

Farvardin 1313: I came home early and she had made her own.

That last one. I stood in the doorway and watched her do it and she did it well — the little flame, the wire, the turn of the wrist, the patience, the whole grammar of it, which takes months to learn and which I had never taught her, and which she had therefore taught herself, alone, in the afternoons, in a house I thought I understood.

She saw me and she did not stop and she did not apologise. She finished it and took it and then she said: don't.

I said I hadn't said anything.

She said: you were going to do a face.

And I laughed. God help me, I laughed, because it was quick and it was quiet and it was said at the level of a comment about the weather, and she had not been funny in nine months, and I would have paid anything for it, and it turned out that I had.

By the end of 1313 she was taking more than I was. By 1314 she was taking more than I could keep up with, and I was buying for both of us and going twice a week and lying to her father, and the money that would not stretch to three hundred tomans for an operation stretched, somehow, to that, for two years, which is an arithmetic I have never been willing to do on paper.

The pain, by the way, was still there. That is what nobody tells you. It had not gone anywhere at all. It had simply stopped being the loudest thing in the room, and then, after a while, so had she.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator, describing the jar of wine he keeps in a niche in the wall. He says it was left to him — that it is old, that it is his inheritance, and that a drop of it is poison.

It was not mine. It came to me from before. Everyone in my family has had it in the house and every one of them has left it where it was.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 66, outer edge, turning the corner, in ink.

Look at what he has done with it, and then look at what you are going to do with it.

He has put the poison in a jar that was in the house before he was born. He has made it a thing he inherited. He did not buy it, he did not mix it, he did not carry it up the stairs — it was simply always in the wall, and all he did was fail to throw it out.

You are going to find that so beautiful you will not be able to breathe.

You brought the tray in. There was no jar and there was no niche and there was no wall and nobody left you anything. You walked from one room into another room carrying it, on a Tuesday in Mehr, and she said no, and you had a sentence ready. Everything you write from here is going to be an argument that the tray was already in the room.

CHAPTER FOUR — THE NICHE

Tehran, 1313-1314 · 1934-1935

WHAT HAPPENED

There is a gap behind the cupboard in the room where I painted.

I do not know if the house was built with it or if it opened up on its own, the way old mud brick will settle and leave a seam. It was at shoulder height, behind the left-hand door of the cupboard where I kept ground pigment and shellac, about the width of two fingers and as deep as my forearm. You would only ever find it if you were looking for somewhere to put something small, which is what I was doing on an evening in Mehr 1313, holding a twist of paper with more opium in it than Zivar was meant to know I had bought.

I want to explain what was happening to my eyes by then, because it matters for what I am about to describe, and because a reader who does not know it will think I am writing about ghosts.

By 1313 I had been smoking daily for seven years. Somewhere in the second or third of those years — I cannot date it, because it did not arrive, it simply became true — I stopped being able to trust the edges of things. A face across a room would hold for a moment after I looked away, the way a lamp does if you stare at it and shut your eyes. A shape in a doorway at dusk would resolve, for half a second, into a person, and then not be a person, and I would already have said something to it before the half second was up.

The doctor on Sepah had a name for the eye part of it and no name at all for the rest.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 52, outer edge, in pencil.

You are going to write that you were looking for a place to hide the paper. That is true and it is not the reason you noticed the gap.

You noticed it because you had been looking at that cupboard door for eleven years and it had never once had a shadow in it, and that evening it did, and you told yourself it was the light.

WHAT HAPPENED

The shadow was in the gap for three evenings before I said anything about it to myself in words.

On the first evening I saw it and did not stop what I was doing. On the second I saw it and stood in front of the cupboard for a while with the brush drying in my hand, and told myself it was the last light off the pigment jars, which do catch the sun at that hour, ochre and red going nearly black.

On the third evening I opened the cupboard door all the way, so there was nothing behind it to make a shadow, and the shadow was still there.

It was a woman's shape, from the collar to about the knee, standing side-on, as if she had been walking past the gap in the wall at the moment the wall stopped being a wall. I did not see a face. I want to be exact about that, because in the weeks after I told myself many times that I had seen a face, and I had not. I saw a shape the size and proportion of a woman standing still, and I saw it for as long as I looked at it, and when I looked away and looked back it was still there, in the same place, at the same angle, as if it had not moved at all in the time I had not been watching it. I did not tell Zivar. I told myself this was because it would frighten her, and that was a lie I found convenient. The true reason was that I did not want to be told it was not there. As long as I did not say it aloud to another person, it remained, in some part of my mind, a fact about the house rather than a fact about me.

I went to the doctor on Sepah about it in Aban.

He asked me to describe exactly what I saw, and I did, and he wrote for a while, and then he asked me a question I had not expected, which was whether I had lost anyone.

I said no. This was 1313. Zivar was alive. I remember being confused by the question and slightly offended by it, as though he had accused me of something.

He said that the eye, when it is damaged in the way mine was becoming damaged, does not invent shapes from nothing. It takes what is already living in a man's mind — a face he looks at often, a

shape he is braced to see — and it lays that over whatever is actually in front of him, the way a second sheet of paper laid over a first will show through if the first is thin enough. He said this could happen before a loss as easily as after one, if a man's mind had already begun rehearsing.

I did not understand him. I want to record that I did not understand him, because I have gone back to that sentence so many times since that it is tempting to write now as if I understood it in 1313, sitting in his office, and I did not. I thought he meant I was seeing my mother, who was dead. I did not consider, even once, that the shape in the cupboard might be a woman who was at that hour thirty feet away in the next room, alive, boiling water for tea. He gave me a tincture for my nerves that did nothing and told me again to stop smoking.

I did not stop smoking.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator describes a crack or opening in the wall of his room, through which he sees, as if painted, the old man and the girl by the stream — the scene he has spent his life copying onto pen cases.

There was a rent in the wall, and through it I saw them, exactly as I had always painted them, as if the wall had simply been in the way of something that was there the whole time.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 54, along the bottom, in ink, a different pressure of the pen — pressed harder, as if written in one sitting rather than added to over weeks.

He asked if you had lost anyone and you said no, and you were being honest, and you were also already wrong.

A person does not have to be dead for you to have lost her. You had already stopped telling her about the shadow in the wall. She had already stopped telling you what the pain was doing at night, because she had seen your face the one time she tried.

Two people can live in a house for two more years, sleep under the same quilt, use the same cups, and still be describing, separately, into two different silences, the exact same absence.

The doctor was closer to the truth than either of you understood. He said the eye lays a face over what is in front of it because the mind has begun rehearsing. He thought he meant grief. He meant marriage. By the end, in your house, they were not two different things.

FROM THE MARGIN, continued

Page 55, a single line, set apart from the rest, in violet ink lightened almost to grey with age — the earliest dated entry in the whole copy, later than every page around it and out of sequence, as if inserted afterward into a space that happened to be blank.

I did not put the shape in the wall. You did that yourselves, the two of you, years before I ever picked up a pen. I only wrote down where I found it.

CHAPTER FIVE — THE LEDGER

Tehran, Khordad 1314 · June 1935

WHAT HAPPENED

I sat down one evening to do the arithmetic I had been refusing for two years, and I want to record honestly that I did not finish it.

I had the pen-case ledger open on one side of the table — what came in, what the dealer paid, what the varnish and the paper and the gold leaf cost me — and on the other side, in my head only, because I would not write it down, the other column. What the shop by the Sepah crossing was owed at the end of each month. What I had borrowed against next season to cover this one.

I got as far as adding the ledger's side. It came to less than it had come to the year before, and less than the year before that. The dealer had told me himself, not unkindly, that a man who buys a pen case now is buying it as an ornament, a curiosity, the way

you'd buy a piece of old brass, and that he could not go on paying me for four when he was only able to sell two.

I did not get as far as the other column. I want to be honest about why. It was not that I could not do the sum. I have done harder sums than that for other men's commissions my whole life. It was that I already knew, in the part of a man that does arithmetic without paper, that the number was going to be larger than what I had, and that knowing the exact size of a hole does nothing for a man except tell him precisely how far down he has already fallen.

I closed the ledger. I did not tell Zivar what the dealer had said. That was the season I sold my father's razor.

It was a good one, English steel, a strop that came with it, and I had never once used it because I went to a barber on the corner like everyone else and kept the razor in a box for reasons I could not have explained even then. I took it to a shop near the bazaar and I got, for it, almost exactly what I was short that month, which felt at the time like a kind of proof that the universe was keeping its own separate ledger and had decided, this once, to balance mine.

I told Zivar I had lost it.

She did not believe me. I could see that she did not believe me. She asked no further question, which was its own kind of answer, and which I took gratefully, the way a man takes any silence he has not had to pay full price for.

I did not sell the north window. I want that on the record too, because it would have been the sensible thing, the shop being what it was by then, and a workshop with ordinary light would have cost a third less to rent. I kept the window because Zivar sat in it. I would like to say that was a form of love and I believe it was, and I would also like the reader to notice that it was cheaper, in every sense a man can be cheap, to keep the one thing that made the mornings bearable than to face what the evenings had become.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator describes an old brass scale in the corner of his room, its pans never once level in all the years he has owned it.

I do not know when it stopped balancing. I only know that I kept it, dust and all, because a scale that tells you nothing weighs less on the conscience than one that tells you the truth.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 61, outer edge, in pencil, the strokes lighter than the entries around it.

You never finished the sum. I did, years later, sitting where you are sitting now, with better light than you had and worse reasons to want the answer.

I am not going to tell you the number. Not to protect you — you are past the age where a number can do you any real damage — but because by the time a man is ready to hear it, it has already stopped being the kind of number that matters. It becomes a fact about a dead year, the way a flood is a fact about a river that has since gone somewhere else.

You sold your father's razor and told me you lost it. I let you have the lie. A marriage runs, in the end, on an inventory of lies each person has quietly agreed to let the other one keep.

CHAPTER SIX — ARDESHIR RETURNS

Tehran, Tir 1314 · July 1935

WHAT HAPPENED

Ardešhir came back from his second Bombay trip of the year in the middle of Tir, and he came to the workshop the way he always did, without writing ahead, a habit I had once found charming and now dreaded a little, the way you dread any visitor who might notice something you have arranged your whole life around not noticing yourself.

He brought a small tin of English tea, because he always brought something, and he stood in the doorway for a moment before he

came in, and I understood afterward that the moment was him deciding what to say about my face.

He did not say anything about my face. He said, instead, did I finish the novel, and I said not yet, and he laughed the way he always laughed at that, as though it were a joke between us rather than a fact about me, and asked whether Zivar had finished it, and I said she had read it more than once.

He looked past me into the shop. There were four pen cases on the shelf where there used to be a dozen. He did not comment on that either, and his not commenting on it was, itself, a kind of comment, the way a man's silence in a house of mourning says everything the visit was for.

Zivar came out to see him, and this is the part of the visit I have kept most carefully, because I did not understand its weight at the time.

She was thin by then, thinner than the summer accounted for, and she had a way of holding a shawl close that she had not had two years before, and Ardeshir looked at her for slightly longer than a polite greeting requires, and then he asked her, in the light way you ask a question you already suspect the answer to, whether she was sleeping.

She said yes.

It was not, strictly, a lie. She was asleep for a great many hours of every day by then. She was simply never asleep at the hours a person means when they ask that question, and she knew it, and I knew it, and Ardeshir, I think, knew that both of us knew it, and none of the three of us said another word about it.

He stayed for tea. He talked about Bombay, about a bookseller there who had shown him a manuscript in a script none of us could name, about the heat, about a ship that had been late. It was the last ordinary afternoon I can remember having in that house, and I did not recognise it as the last one while it was happening, which I am told is also normal.

He came once more, in the spring of 1317, after. He stood in the doorway the way he had that day and did not know what to say, and

I did not know what to say to him either, and he left within the half hour, and I never saw him again. I do not think it was unkindness. I think some visits cost a man more than he has, and he was honest enough not to keep paying for one that no longer had anything to give him back.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator describes a visitor from the past looking at him with the particular horror of a man who last knew him whole.

He did not say what he saw. Some kindnesses are only the withholding of an accurate description.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 74, outer edge, in ink.

He asked if I was sleeping, not you. You have always told this story as though the question was aimed at you and you deflected it on my behalf, and I understand why — it is easier to be the one who protects than the one who was asked after and found wanting.

But it was me he was worried for. Men have always found it easier to worry about the wife than to say plainly what they see happening to the husband. I let him worry about me because it meant nobody had to look directly at you, and I want you to know, all these years later, that I did that on purpose, and I would do it again.

CHAPTER SEVEN — SIZDAH BEDAR

Tehran, 13 Farvardin 1315 · 2 April 1936, afternoon

WHAT HAPPENED

Sizdah Bedar is the thirteenth day, the last of the new year's festival, and the custom is that the whole household goes out — into a park, a garden, along the river, anywhere with grass and running water — because the thirteenth is thought to carry bad luck, and the only way to put it safely behind you is to spend the day outdoors and let it pass over an empty house.

The city goes out. That is not a figure of speech. By noon that day, in an ordinary year, whole streets stand empty, shutters down, and the parks along the Karaj road are so full of families that you cannot see the grass they came out to sit on.

We stayed in.

I want to record this plainly: it was not a decision either of us made out loud. Neither of us said, this year we will not go. We simply did not get up early enough, and then it was too warm to want to walk, and then it was a thing we were not doing rather than a thing we had chosen not to do, which is how most of the worst days in a marriage arrange themselves.

The argument started over a doctor.

There was a man, a colleague of the one on Sepah, who had begun treating what he called the smoker's exhaustion — a course of some weeks, confinement, a fee that was less than the operation four years before had cost but was still more than I had. I had heard of him from the dealer, of all people, who knew a customer who had gone through it and come out the other side able to sleep through a night. I raised it that afternoon, while the street outside sat empty and the whole city was somewhere else being happy.

She said no before I had finished the sentence.

I said it might help. I said the word cure, which I regretted the moment it left me, because she looked at me the way you look at a man who has just told you he understands your illness better than you do.

She said the man near the bazaar had been right about the first doctor, four years ago, and she had been cut open for nothing, and I said that was a different doctor for a different thing, and she said it was always a different doctor for a different thing and always the same two people paying for it.

I said we could find the money.

She said, and I have never once been able to argue with this sentence in fifteen years of trying, that finding the money had never once been the part we were bad at.

It went on longer than I am going to write down, because most of an argument like that is repetition, the same three or four true things said in a slightly different order until both people are too tired to say them any better. It ended the way it always ended, with both of us stopping rather than finishing — she went to lie down, and I went to the workshop and did not do any work, and somewhere in the empty afternoon the city began to fill up again with families coming home, tired and sunburned and, for one more year, safely past the thirteenth.

I did not know, sitting in that empty workshop, that I had already had the argument I would spend fifteen years wishing I had lost.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator, hearing celebration in the street below while shut inside a room with his illness.

I heard them going out, all of them, into the light, and I understood that whatever was wrong with me had already decided I would not be going with them.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 79, along the bottom, in ink.

You were not fighting about a doctor. I want that said once, plainly, because you are going to spend the rest of this book, and the rest of your life, believing you were.

We were fighting about whether either of us still had the right to ask the other one for one more year. I did not think I did. You would not stop thinking you did, which is either the best or the worst thing about you, and I was too tired that afternoon to work out which.

I am glad, if it is any comfort to a man who does not deserve comfort from me, that we did not go out that day. Some houses need at least one person to stay behind and let the thirteenth land on them instead of passing over empty rooms. It fell on us so it would not have to fall on anyone we loved. I have decided, since, that this is not nothing.

CHAPTER EIGHT — SIXTY-NINE DAYS

Tehran, Bahman 1314 – 13 Farvardin 1315 · January – April 1936

WHAT HAPPENED

I have already told the reader that she had sixty-nine days left from the morning she finished reading the novel, and I want to use this chapter to say what those days actually looked like, because grief likes to compress a stretch of ordinary afternoons into a single terrible sentence, and I do not think that is honest.

Most of the sixty-nine days looked like nothing. She slept badly and ate less. She kept to the room with the korsī more than she used to, because the charcoal was the only thing that reliably warmed her by then. She stopped going to her father's shop, which she had still done once a week even after her health worsened, and when I asked her why she said the walk had gotten longer, which was not true — the walk was the same length it had always been — and I did not press her, because I had my own version of that lie and did not feel entitled to take hers away.

She read the book. I want to be exact about how often: most days, some part of it, sometimes for an hour, sometimes for most of an afternoon. I assumed, because it was the simplest explanation and I was not looking for a complicated one, that she was reading it the way a person reads a thing they love, over and over, the way I have since come to read her margins the same way.

She kept it near the lamp, closer than she used to, and there were afternoons I came into the room and she closed it quickly, not urgently, just quickly, the way you close a door when you do not want the draft to reach a sick room. I told myself it was modesty. A novel like that, I thought, is not the kind of thing a person wants discussed while they are unwell. The arrangement, by then, had stopped being about pleasure for either of us, though we went on calling it that out of habit, the way you keep calling a house a home long after you have stopped feeling anything in it. She did not sleep more easily for it any longer. I did not either. We kept doing it the way you keep paying rent on a room you no longer live in, because

the alternative — admitting what the money had actually been buying, all this time — was worse than the debt.

I do not remember a single one of the sixty-nine days as a whole day. I remember an hour here, a sentence there, the shape of her hand around a cup. I have tried, since, to lay them end to end into something continuous, and I cannot do it, and I have decided that this, too, is a kind of mercy, though I did not ask for it and would not have chosen it if I had been offered a say.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator, describing his wife's decline as something moving through the house independently of either of them, like weather.

I watched it arrive in her the way you watch a storm arrive over a wall you cannot see past — not the storm itself, only the light going the particular colour that means the storm has already decided to come.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 82, a single unbroken passage, in violet ink, unmistakable once the reader knows to look for it — though I did not, of course, know to look for it the first several hundred times I read this page.

Sixty-nine. I did not choose to count them. They counted themselves, the way a candle counts itself down without being asked to, and somewhere around the fortieth I understood I was going to reach the end of the count with time to prepare and no way to use it. I want you to know I was not afraid, most days. I was tired, the specific tiredness of a person doing careful work on a deadline nobody else knows about, and I have never once blamed you for being tired in the same house as me, at the same time, for entirely different reasons.

I closed the book quickly those afternoons because the ink was still wet, not because I was ashamed. I would like that corrected, fifteen years late, in case it matters to you now. It was never shame. It was only that a wet page cannot be closed slowly.

CHAPTER NINE — THE JAR

Rey, 1314 · 1935

WHAT HAPPENED

Once a month, if the weather allowed it, I took the little steam railway down to Rey. Everyone called it the smoky machine. It left from a shed at the edge of the city and took the better part of an hour to go a distance a fast horse could do in half that, and I liked it precisely for that reason — it was the only part of my week in which I was moving and could not be asked to do anything.

I want to explain why I went, because by 1314 it was not yet about the grave. The grave was still half a year away, though neither of us knew to count it that way yet. In 1314 I went to Rey because there were foreigners digging there, Americans, from a museum, at a mound called Cheshmeh Ali, and where foreigners dig, men with spades and no permits dig beside them in the dark, and what those men bring up finds its way, within a week, to a coffee house near the shrine, sold across a table for whatever a buyer will give.

I was not a collector. I want that understood. I went, at first, the way another man might go to watch a demolition — because it was interesting, and free, and gave a shape to a Friday.

There was a man at the coffee house, older than me, who kept a corner table and a cloth he would unfold when he trusted you. I do not know his name. I never asked it and he never offered it, and in five years of buying small things from him — a bead once, a shard of glazed brick, nothing of consequence — that never once struck either of us as strange. He knew me as the pen-case man. I knew him as the man with the cloth. On a Friday in Mehr 1314 he unfolded it further than usual and there was a jar.

It was small enough to sit in two hands, the glaze on it gone the colour of a bruise healing, blue going to grey going to a kind of green, and it had a line of eyes painted around the shoulder of it, six or eight of them, wide open, no pupils, the way a child draws an eye when he has been told to draw one and has never really looked at his own.

He said it was old. He said a word for how old that I did not believe and still do not believe, though I have since read that the ground at Rey goes back further than anyone in that coffee house understood, so it is possible he was closer to right than either of us knew. He said it had come up two nights before, from a pit the foreigners had not yet reached, which meant, though neither of us said it, that it had been taken before anyone with a claim to it had the chance to say no.

I asked him the price. He named one. I did not argue it, because I had already decided, in the time it took him to unfold the cloth, that I was going to own it.

It cost me the price of a coat.

I did not need a coat that year. I want that on the page, because it would be easy to write this scene as a man choosing between warmth and beauty, a poor man's dilemma, and it was not that. I had a coat. I bought a small clay jar with painted eyes on it, from a man whose name I did not know, dug two nights earlier out of ground that was not his to dig, because I wanted it the way you want a thing when you have stopped being able to tell wanting from needing. I brought it home on the smoky machine with it wrapped in a shirt in my lap, and I did not tell Zivar what I had paid.

She held it for a long time that evening, turning it, and she said the eyes were watching each other, not us, which I thought was a strange thing to notice and have never been able to stop noticing since. She asked where it came from and I said Rey, and she asked how old, and I told her the word the man had used, and she said, not unkindly, that I had probably paid for a story as much as a jar.

I said I knew that.

She kept it on the shelf by the window after that, where the light from the workshop caught it in the last hour of the afternoon, and for the six months she had left she would sometimes stop what she was doing and turn it a quarter turn, so that a different eye faced the room, and never once said why, and I never once asked.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator describes an ancient jar, found beside a grave, painted with a cypress tree and a girl offering a flower — the same image he paints on every pen case — and says it must have come from before he was born, a sign meant for him across some great distance of time.

It could not have been made for me and yet it was unmistakably mine. I understood then that some things are not made and then found. They are found, and the finding is what makes them.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 88, outer edge, in ink, unhurried — this entry has none of the pressure or speed of the ones around it.

He says it was made for him. He says the finding is what makes a thing sacred.

You paid for it. You paid the price of a coat to a man whose name you never learned, for an object dug in the dark from ground that belonged, if it belonged to anyone still living, to no one either of you would ever meet. There is a whole science now for uncovering such things properly, with paper and permission and a foreign university's patience, working not forty feet from where you stood, and you went around it because the man with the cloth was faster and did not ask questions.

I am not telling you this to shame you. Everyone who ever loved a beautiful thing in that city got it this way, one way or another, and I turned it on the shelf myself, more times than I ever told you, because I liked which eye was looking at the room and which eye had its back to it.

I am telling you because of what you are going to do with it in six months, on a night I have not let you read yet.

You are going to remember it as inherited. You are going to remember it as always having been in the house, the way the man in the novel remembers his poisoned wine — old, given, no fingerprints on it. I want it in the record, plainly, in ink, while I am

still the one holding the pen: it was bought, on a Friday, for the price of a coat, by a man who wanted it.

Nothing that happens after this chapter was inherited from anywhere. You are going to want very badly to believe otherwise. I would like at least one page in this book where that is not permitted.

CHAPTER TEN — THE NIGHT

Tehran, 13 Farvardin 1315 · 2 April 1936

A note on order. This book does not go in a straight line, on purpose — I have put things down as they came back to me, not as they happened, and I would rather warn the reader of that once, here, than pretend otherwise. This chapter and Chapter Seven are the same day. Chapter Seven is the argument, in the afternoon. This is what came after it, that night, in the same house, a few hours later. I am telling it in the order I can finally bear to tell it, which is not the order it occurred.

WHAT HAPPENED

The room was the one with the korsi in it, because it was still cold enough at night for the charcoal, though the days had turned.

I had gone to bed and come back out again. I do not remember why. I have tried a hundred times to remember what took me out of the bedroom and into that room at that hour and I cannot, and I have stopped believing there was a reason. Sometimes a man is simply awake.

She was sitting where she always sat, on the far side of the frame, with the quilt over her knees and the tray in front of her. The lamp was low. It was always low by then; oil cost money and she did not need much light for what she was doing, which she had been doing without me for over a year.

I sat down across from her. Neither of us said anything for a while.

I want to record, because it is true and because I have never told anyone, that I was tired. Not sad, that night. Tired. The kind of tired that comes after a long argument, which we had had that

afternoon, about a doctor and a fee, and which had ended the way it always ended, with both of us stopping rather than finishing.

She worked without hurrying. I have described the way she did it before — the flame, the wire, the turn of the wrist — and that night was no different from a hundred other nights except that I stayed in the room instead of going back to bed.

She looked up once, partway through, and said: you don't have to sit there.

I said I knew that.

She went back to what she was doing.

I am not going to describe what I was thinking, because I do not know, and anything I wrote here would be an invention put in afterward to make the next hour make sense, and I promised at the start of this book that I would not do that.

What I can describe is the room.

The charcoal under the korsī ticked now and then as it settled. Somewhere outside, a door on a hinge that needed oil, opening and shutting in the wind, three streets off, the way sound carries at night when a city has gone quiet. The lamp made one sound, a small catch in the wick, every few minutes, that I had never noticed before that night and have heard in my head every night since.

She finished, and lay back against the bolster, and her breathing changed the way it always changed, and slowed the way it always slowed. I watched it slow.

I want to be exact about the time because I have gone over it so many times that I trust the number: it was perhaps forty minutes between when she lay back and when the room was silent in the particular way a room is silent when there is one fewer person breathing in it than there was an hour before.

I did not call out. I did not go to the door. I did not put my hand on her chest to see if it was moving, though I have imagined a thousand times a version of that night in which I did, and in every one of those versions it is too late by the time I think to.

I sat in the chair on my side of the frame, across from her, for the whole forty minutes, and I watched, and I did not move, and somewhere in that time it stopped being a thing I was allowing and became a thing that had already happened, and I could not afterward find the moment where one turned into the other.

Then I went over.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator, describing the woman on the bed, and his own stillness beside her.

I do not know how long I sat there. Time had stopped meaning what it had meant. I only know that at some point I understood she was not going to speak again, and that I had known this for some time before I understood it, and that the knowing and the understanding had arrived by two different roads and reached me an hour apart.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 71. No border decoration, no date, set alone in the middle of an otherwise blank page — the only page in the whole copy with this much white space left around a single entry.

You are going to spend the rest of your life explaining this hour to yourself as something that was done to you.

A jar you did not choose. A stranger with a hearse. A sickness with its own will, moving through the house like weather, and you simply in its path, the way a man is in the path of rain.

I was in the room. I know exactly how long you sat there, because I was the one counting.

You are allowed to have wanted the quiet. Everyone who has ever loved somebody through a year like that one has wanted the quiet, at three in the morning, just for an hour, just so they could sleep. It is not the thing that will send you to hell and it was never going to be the thing that killed me.

What I cannot forgive — and I do not think forgiveness is even the right size of word for it, I think I mean something closer to grief,

grief at you specifically, on top of the other grief — is that you have never once, in fifteen years, let yourself simply say: I was tired, and I stayed in the chair, and I let her go, and I did not call for help I could not have summoned in time anyway.

That is a true, sad, forgivable sentence about an ordinary, exhausted man.

You built a murder instead. You have been serving a sentence for a killing that never happened for fifteen years, and I would like you to notice, just once, that the man serving it and the man in the chair are being punished for two completely different things.

FROM THE MARGIN, continued

The same page, lower down, in a smaller hand, as if written some time after the entry above it — perhaps the same sitting, perhaps not.

I am not angry that you sat still.

I am asking you to stop calling it something else.

CHAPTER ELEVEN — THE DRIVE

The road to Rey, 13-14 Farvardin 1315 · the night of 2-3 April 1936

WHAT HAPPENED

The doctor on Sepah had given me, years before, a preparation for my nerves that did nothing, and I had kept the bottle out of the same instinct that keeps a man from throwing away a key to a lock he no longer owns. There was a second bottle beside it in the cupboard, one I am fairly sure Zivar had got for herself at some point in the last year, the kind of folk remedy an apothecary will sell a person who cannot sleep and has stopped trusting doctors — tatureh, in the old name for it, the same plant that grows wild and ugly along half the ditches in that country and that everyone's grandmother has an opinion about.

I do not remember deciding to take it. I remember the two bottles being on the shelf, and I remember it being very important, in the hour after I went over to her, that I not be entirely present for what came next, and I remember pouring something, and after that I am

telling the reader what I have been told and what I have pieced together, not what I know.

FROM THE BOOK

The narrator describes the arrival of a hearse, drawn by two ash-coloured horses, driven by a hunchbacked man he has never seen before and never sees again.

He did not ask where. He did not ask why. He simply waited, the way a man waits who has done this so many times that a new grief holds no more interest for him than the last one did.

WHAT HAPPENED

I have a hearse in my memory, and two horses, and a driver with a shape to his back that I would know anywhere and could not, today, pick out of a room of ordinary men. I have a road that I remember as going toward Rey, past the kilns, the smoke lying flat and low the way it does at night, and I have a conversation with the driver that I remember in full — a long, ordinary conversation about the weather, about a fare he'd had the week before, about the price of barley — and I want to tell the reader plainly that I do not believe that conversation happened, not because I doubt my memory of it, but because I have since learned what that plant does to a man's evening, and a fluent, detailed conversation with someone who is not making any of it up on your behalf is exactly the kind of thing it manufactures, whole, and hands you afterward as a memory indistinguishable from any other.

What I trust: I left the house. I trust that because I was not in it in the morning. I trust that there was digging, because of what was on my hands and under my nails when the light came back. I trust that I went some distance, because of how tired the horse was — there was a horse, ours, our own animal and not a hired one, which I did not understand until years later, when I worked out that no hired driver would have let a customer take his own beast on a debt, which meant there had been no hired driver at all, only a man alone with a horse and a job no one else was going to do for him.

I do not trust the hunchback. I do not trust the conversation about barley. I do not trust the second horse.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 92, outer edge, in ink, unhurried, as though written at a much later sitting than the pages around it.

I am not going to tell you where the hunchback came from, because I do not fully know either, and I have decided, wherever I am, that some things are allowed to stay strange even after everything else in this book has been explained. I will tell you this much: you were alone. There was one horse, because there was only ever one horse, and there was one man, and the digging took most of the night, and somewhere in the middle of it your mind did what a mind does when a man asks it to carry a weight it was never built to carry by itself — it invented a second pair of hands.

That is not madness. I want that on the record, in ink, for whoever reads this after you. That is mercy, manufactured on the spot, by the only machine in the house still capable of manufacturing it.

You did not have help that night. You gave yourself the memory of help, because the alternative — a man alone in the dark with a spade and everything he had left of his wife — was more than even an addled mind could carry without inventing someone to carry the other end.

CHAPTER TWELVE — THE NEWSPAPER

Tehran, 1320-1330 · 1941-1951

WHAT HAPPENED

I have already told the reader how I found out the novel was being printed — on a tram, behind two men arguing about whether it was filth or the first honest book in four hundred years — and I want to use this chapter to show what ten years of writing to a stranger about it actually looked like, because I do not think “he wrote letters” gives it its proper shape.

Here is the first one, more or less as I sent it, on the fourteenth of Tir, 1320:

To the Editor, care of the literary page —

I write regarding the serialised novel currently appearing in your esteemed publication. I have had occasion to compare the instalment of the ninth to a complete manuscript in my possession, and I find that a passage of some length — concerning the narrator's account of a jar found near a place of burial, and its significance to him — has been omitted without notice to the reader. I would be obliged if the editorial staff could account for this omission, and, where possible, arrange for the passage's restoration in a subsequent instalment. I remain, respectfully, M. Sarshar.

Here is the reply, dated eleven days later, in a hand I would come to know better than my own brother's, had I had one:

Dear Mr Sarshar — Thank you for your careful attention to our literary page. The text we are printing is the text supplied to us by the manuscript's custodian, and we have no authority to add to or subtract from it. I have nonetheless made a note of the passage you describe and will raise the question with the appropriate party. With respect and gratitude for a reader's diligence, H. Aram.

I want the reader to notice what I did not notice for years: that a passage concerning a jar found near a place of burial does not appear, in that form, anywhere in the printed novel. I was not describing a gap in the newspaper's version. I was describing a gap in my own book, in my own hand, in the margin, and asking a stranger to explain why a newspaper had failed to print my wife's handwriting.

He never once told me that. I have had a decade to consider why, and the kindest answer I have found is also, I think, the true one.

The letters went on like that for years, each one a small formal document, each one answered with the particular Persian courtesy that can hold a door open for a man for a decade without ever once letting him see what's actually behind it. I asked about a scene involving a lamp that would not stay lit. I asked about a conversation with a jar-seller that I insisted had been cut for space.

I asked, in 1324, about an entire chapter concerning a wife's handwriting, which does not exist in any edition of that novel printed anywhere in the world, and Hushang Aram wrote back that he had consulted his colleagues and none of them recalled such a chapter, but that he would keep my inquiry on file.

I knew, by then. I have already told the reader I knew by about 1325. I kept writing anyway, and here is the truest thing I can say about why: it was the only correspondence I had with anyone, about anything, and a man who has been alone for eleven years will go on posting letters to an empty office rather than stop having somewhere to send them.

He sends a note every Nowruz. This year's, which arrived three weeks ago and which I still have on the table, says only: Another year, Mr Sarshar. I hope it finds your inquiries closer to their answer than the last one did. — H.A.

I have read that sentence more times than is reasonable for four lines from a man I have never met. I no longer think he believes there is a missing chapter. I think he has understood, for years, that a missing chapter is not really what I have been asking him to find.

FROM THE BOOK

A minor passage: the narrator describes writing to an official body about a matter of public record, receiving only formal, unfailingly polite replies that answer nothing.

They were never rude to me. That was the worst of it. A rude man can be resisted. A patient one simply outlasts you.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 104, outer edge, in ink — the only entry in the whole book, by my count, that reads as if it is trying not to laugh.

This is the one chapter in which I am going to let myself find you funny, and I hope, wherever you have got to by now, that you can stand to be found funny for a page.

You have spent ten years accusing a national newspaper of censoring a novel that was never, in any of its fifty original copies, going to be sold or read in this country in the first place. There is no censor, Mahmud. There has never been a censor. There was only ever me, choosing, a little at a time, across eleven weeks, what a grieving man could be handed in a single week without it finishing him.

Mr Aram has been very patient with a case of censorship that does not exist. I find that I am fond of him for it, and I have never met him, and I am dead, which I understand puts a certain kind of fondness beyond my reach regardless. Write to him again this year. Tell him I said thank you. He will not know what for, and you should not tell him, and he will file it politely all the same.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN — VIOLET

*Tehran, 9 Farvardin - 2 Ordibehesht 1330 · late March - 22 April
1951*

WHAT HAPPENED

Word came on a Tuesday, in the paper, four lines on an inside page: the author of the novel had died in Paris, on the ninth of April, by his own hand, in a rented room, and had asked to be buried there rather than sent home.

I read the four lines standing in the street, the way I had read the newspaper's first cut of him in 1320, and I felt the strangest thing, which I will set down honestly because I promised to. I felt nothing for a man I had never met and everything for the fact that he had, and I could not at that moment have told you where the line between those two feelings was.

I went home and I did not go to the workshop. I sat at the table with the copy in front of me, closed, for most of the afternoon.

I want to explain what I did next in the plainest words I have, because it is the smallest action in this entire book and it is the one that undoes everything else in it.

The lamp on the table had gone dry sometime in the night before, and I had not yet filled it. The room, by four in the afternoon at that time of year, still had daylight coming through the one high window, weak but real, the first real daylight I believe I had ever read that book by in fifteen years.

I opened it near the middle, where I always opened it, out of no plan at all, only habit, and there on page ninety-six, in the margin, in the last light of that window, I saw that the ink was violet. I do not know how to make a reader who has not lived inside a bad pair of eyes for fifteen years understand what that was like, so I will only describe what happened in my body, and let the rest be inferred.

I put the book down. I picked it back up. I carried it to the window itself and held the page flat against the glass, and the colour did not change, and I understood, in the space of perhaps four seconds, three separate things in an order I have never been able to unscramble since.

The first was that I had never once, not on a single evening in fifteen years, looked at that book by daylight.

The second was that the ink was not mine. I do not use violet. I have never in my life bought a bottle of violet ink. There is only one person who ever did, and she bought it from a stationer two doors from her father's shop, and she told me once, in a room with a north window, that she liked it because it let her always know which pages were hers.

The third thing arrived a little behind the other two, the way the worst things always do, arriving late so that you have already absorbed the first blow and have nothing left with which to meet the second. It was this: if the ink was hers, then the hand was hers. Not similar to mine. Not close enough to fool a hurried man. Hers, taught by six years of writing my letters until she could shape my name as easily as her own, put to use one final time on four hundred pages of a stranger's novel, so that a man who could not tell one colour from another would never once have reason to doubt that he was reading his own thoughts back to himself.

I sat down on the floor of that room, not the chair, the floor, and I stayed there until the light went, and I did not fill the lamp.

FROM THE BOOK

The closing passage of the source novel. The narrator looks into a mirror and no longer recognises the reflection.

I looked in the glass and saw, in my own place, the old man — bent, biting at his own finger, exactly as I had painted him for so many years without once asking myself why. I understood then that I had not been drawing a stranger. I had been drawing forward.

FROM THE MARGIN

Page 96. The passage beside the passage above. Violet, unmistakably, once you have been told to look — and I want the reader to notice that I am asking you to do in a sentence what took me fifteen years and a dead man in Paris to do for myself.

If you have got this far in daylight, then you already know, and I do not need to tell you who is writing this.

I am not going to apologise for the fifteen years, because I do not think I did anything to you that needs forgiving, and I have had a long time, wherever I am, to be certain of that.

I knew what your eyes were becoming before you did. I watched you paint the same face for two years before either of us said the word doctor. I knew, by the last winter, that whatever I wrote in this book by lamplight would look to you exactly like your own hand, in your own ink, because by then everything in that room looked the same to you regardless of what it was.

So I chose the ink anyway. Not because I thought you would never find out. Because I thought you would find out on a day when you could finally afford to, and not before.

I am sorry it took a stranger's death to bring you to a window. I am not sorry about anything else. There is one more thing, and then I am finished, and you will have to decide for yourself what to do with fifteen years of Fridays.

We chose it together, in the spring, before either of us said out loud what the spring was for. Ebn-e Babuyeh. The row along the eastern wall, where the ground is not marked because the people in it were never going to be able to pay for a stone. Six rows in from the gate. The ninth resting place along that row, counting from the wall.

I did not choose it because it was easy to remember. I chose it because you would be the one counting, on a Friday, with your hand on the ground, and I wanted you to have to do that with your whole body before you were allowed to have it back.

Go in the morning. Not tonight. You have waited fifteen years; one more sunrise will not be the thing that finishes you.

— Z.

CODA — EBN-E BABUYEH

Tehran, 23 Ordibehesht 1330 · 13 May 1951

I went in the morning, as she asked, though I do not know now why I obeyed an instruction written fifteen years before it could be read.

The gate is the same gate I have walked through nine times in five years, looking at the wrong ground. Six rows in. I counted them the way you count anything you are afraid of finishing — slowly, touching each one, as if speed might make me miss it and I would rather be wrong from carefulness than wrong from haste.

The ninth place along that row is unmarked, like every other place in it. There is nothing there that a stranger would call a grave. There is a slight settling in the earth, the kind any ground makes over fifteen years whether or not anyone is under it, and there is a wild caper plant growing out of the low mound of it, which grows everywhere in that soil and means nothing.

I do not know if it is her.

I want to set that down as the last fact in this book, because everything else in it I have been able to check against a ledger or a licence or a doctor's word, and this I cannot check against anything at all. I have no shovel with me and I did not bring one, and I sat on

the ground beside that unmarked place for the better part of the morning and I did not dig.

I think I have understood, sitting there, that the digging was never going to be the point. The point was fifteen years of Fridays, and the point was a stranger dying in Paris so that I would finally hold a book up to a window, and the point was a woman who spent the last sixty-nine days of her life writing a comfort so well disguised that it took me the whole rest of my life to be permitted to receive it.

I am fifty-three years old. I make an object nobody wants, out of paper, for a trade that will not survive me. I have one book with her hand in it, and I know now which pages are hers, and I find that I would rather have the fifteen years back than the knowing, and I cannot have either one, and I am aware that wanting both is the most ordinary thing a man can want and the least available.

I sat there until the sun moved off the wall. Then I walked home, past the kilns, past the smoky machine sitting cold at the little station, into a city that has been rebuilding itself around me for twenty years without once asking whether I was ready, and I let myself into the house, and I filled the lamp, and for the first time in fifteen years I did not need it to read by.

I needed it because it was getting dark, and I was tired, and that was all.

GLOSSARY

Aban aa-BAAN — Middle Persian. from the Avestan āpō, the waters; the eighth month of the Iranian calendar, late October to late November. One of the months of the ledger in Chapter Five.

Amir Arsalan a-MEER ar-sa-LAAN — Persian. Amir Arsalan-e Namdar, the long prose romance told nightly to Naser al-Din Shah in the 1870s and taken down by his daughter — the most popular Persian storybook of the century that follows. Four volumes of it are among the books Zivar reads at her father's counter.

Ardeshir ar-de-SHEER — Middle Persian. a Sasanian royal name, still borne chiefly by Zoroastrians. The printing-house traveller who brings the copy back from Bombay.

Azar aa-ZAR — Middle Persian. fire; the ninth month, late November to late December.

Bahman bah-MAN — Middle Persian. from the Avestan Vohu Manah, good mind or good purpose; the eleventh month, late January to late February.

cheragh-e kur che-RAAGH-e KOOR — Persian. blind lamp. The book's own title, چراغ کور, set on the front cover under the English. A lamp that gives light and cannot see by it.

Cheshmeh Ali chesh-MEH a-LEE — Persian. Ali's spring. The prehistoric mound and spring at Rey, excavated in 1934–36 by an American expedition — and, in this book, the place the painted jar comes out of the ground and the reason Mahmud is at Rey at all.

Ebn-e Babuyeh ebn-e baa-boo-YEH — Persian. the great cemetery at Rey, south of Tehran, named for the tenth-century traditionist buried there. Its eastern wall is the strip for the poor and the unclaimed, unmarked, and it is the last place on Mahmud's list.

Farvardin far-var-DEEN — Middle Persian. from the Avestan *fravashi*, the guardian spirits of the dead; the first month of the Iranian year, late March to late April, and the month the book opens and closes in.

ghalamdan gha-lam-DAAN — Persian. pen holder, from *ghalam*, a reed pen. The lacquered papier-mâché pen case Mahmud makes: twenty or thirty layers of paper pasted and shaved harder than wood, grounded, painted, and varnished eleven times, a coat a day. He gives the account himself in Chapter One.

Hushang hoo-SHANG — Middle Persian. the second king of the Pishdadian line in the *Shahnameh*, who is said to have discovered fire. Here, the given name of the sub-editor Hushang Aram.

Karaj ka-RAJ — Persian. the river and the road running north-west out of Tehran toward the Alborz. Its parks are where the city goes for Sizdah Bedar.

Khordad khor-DAAD — Middle Persian. from the Avestan *Haurvatât*, wholeness; the third month, late May to late June.

korsi KOR-see — Persian, *kursī*, *seat*. a low wooden frame set over a charcoal brazier and covered with a heavy quilt, the household sitting round it with their legs beneath. For most of an Iranian winter it is the only warm place in the house, and it is the room Zivar keeps to.

Lalezar laa-le-ZAAR — Persian. tulip bed. The Tehran avenue that was the city's shopping street in the 1930s — the shop where the men who no longer write with reeds buy a fountain pen instead.

Mehr MEHR — Middle Persian. from Mithra, the divinity of covenant and of the sun; the seventh month, late September to late October. Also, in ordinary Persian, kindness.

Nasser Khosrow NAA-ser khos-ROW — Persian. the Tehran street named for the eleventh-century poet and traveller. Zivar's father keeps his binding shop off it.

Nowruz no-ROOZ — Persian, *new day*. the Iranian new year, beginning at the spring equinox and running thirteen days. Hushang Aram sends his note at Nowruz.

Ordibehesht or-dee-be-HESHT — Middle Persian. from the Avestan Asha Vahishta, best truth or best order; the second month, late April to late May.

Rey RAY — Persian. the ancient city immediately south of Tehran, and for two thousand years the ground its dead are taken to. Mahmud goes down to it once a month on the little steam railway everyone called the smoky machine.

Sarshar sar-SHAAR — Persian. brimming over, full to the top. Mahmud chose the name himself in 1298, when the government required surnames — and he says so in Chapter One.

Sepah se-PAAH — Persian, *army*. the Tehran street and square. Two doctors in this book keep rooms on it: the one who names what is wrong with Mahmud's sight, and the one who names the operation.

Sizdah Bedar seez-DAH be-DAAR — Persian, *thirteen out of doors*. the thirteenth and last day of Nowruz, when the whole household goes out to grass and running water and does not come back until evening, because to stay indoors on it is unlucky. It is the day Zivar died.

tatureh taa-too-REH — Persian. datura, thorn-apple: the coarse weed of ditches and waste ground, whose seed is an old and dangerous domestic sedative. The second bottle in the cupboard.

Tir TEER — Middle Persian. from Tishtrya, the rain-bringing star; the fourth month, late June to late July.

toman to-MAAN — Persian. the Iranian unit of account, ten rials. Three hundred of them is the fee for the operation, and Mahmud sets out at length what three hundred was.

Yazd YAZD — Persian. the desert city of central Iran and the historic centre of its Zoroastrian community. Ardeshir's home.

Zivar zee-VAAR — Persian. ornament, adornment; also a woman's given name. Mahmud's wife.

He has spent fifteen years looking for a grave he dug himself.

Mahmud Sarshar makes pen cases nobody wants, in a house nobody visits, in a city that has rebuilt itself around him without asking. His wife died on a night he cannot remember and buried somewhere he has never found. His only company is a stranger's banned novel — fifty copies, printed in secret, stamped not for sale or publication in Iran — annotated in the margins, in his own hand, in years the opium took from him.

Or so he believes.

A noir of grief, addiction, and one small colour a man has not been able to see for fifteen years — inspired by, and in dialogue with, Sadeqh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*.

The answer was never hidden. He simply could no longer see the colour of the truth.

