

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 71



دستِ ثابت

A STEADY HAND

C H E W Z

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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FROM THURSDAY NIGHTS

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

QANAT No. 3 - LONGITUDINAL SECTION

قنات شماره ۳ - مقطع طولی

Mother well depth: 38.4 m

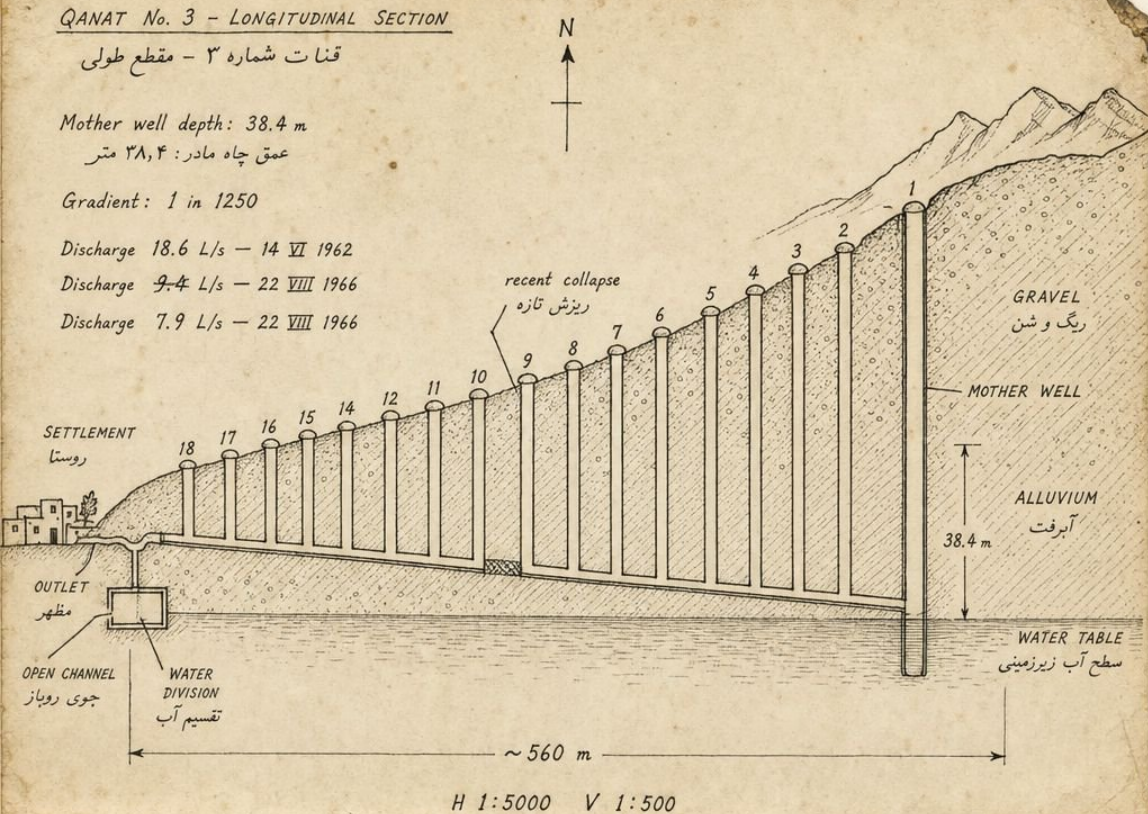
عمق چاه مادر: ۳۸٫۴ متر

Gradient: 1 in 1250

Discharge 18.6 L/s - 14 VII 1962

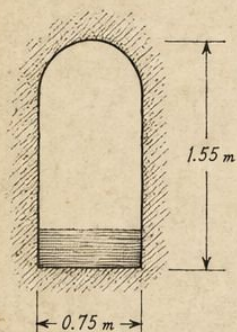
Discharge 9.4 L/s - 22 VIII 1966

Discharge 7.9 L/s - 22 VIII 1966



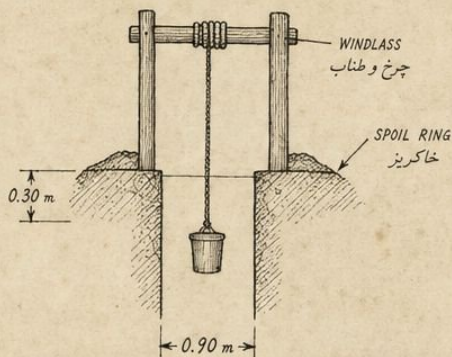
TUNNEL SECTION

مقطع قنات



SHAFT HEAD SECTION

مقطع رأس میله



Total shafts observed: 18

تعداد میله ها: ۱۸

یادداشت: آب روان و شفاف بود.

تاریخ: ۱۴ خرداد ۱۳۴۱

یادداشت: ریزش در میله شماره ۹ مشاهده شد.

تاریخ: ۲۲ مرداد ۱۳۴۵

HYDROLOGICAL SURVEY RECORD

DEPARTMENT: MINISTRY OF WATER AND POWER

REGION: KHORASAN

SITE: AB-BIDAR

STRUCTURE: QANAT No. 3

SHEET: 2

SCALE: H 1:5000 / V 1:500

DRAWN BY: R.M.

DATE: 1966

REF. NO.: AB/QN 14-66

SCALE IN METRES



SYNOPSIS

A burglar takes a bag off a luggage rack because it is unattended and he is what he is. Inside: a stethoscope, a perished blood-pressure cuff mended with electrical tape, a prescription pad, and a Ministry of Health identity card belonging to a man born eleven months before him.

He wants it only so that he can say a sentence with a title in it if a policeman ever stops him.

Then he gets off a bus in Ab-Bidar, a village of four hundred people on a dying qanat, and a man outside the shop stands up and says: *Doctor? They said Thursday.*

Nobody in Ab-Bidar assumes anything. They have been expecting a locum for eleven months and have been told about six of them. Five did not come. The sixth is standing at the top of the road on the correct day of the week with a stethoscope in a plastic bag, and he has not said one word.

He intends four days.

A Steady Hand is the account he wrote afterwards, set down as forty numbered notes to a successor: the record of a man who cannot read a drug name discovering that most of what a rural clinic does is reassurance, referral and being unhurried — and that a village which has had no doctor for eleven months has not therefore had no medicine.

There is a nurse who has signed a broken man's name four hundred and eleven times and knows the number. There is a doctor in the back room who is funny for four minutes at a time. There is a well-digger of seventy-four who has gone down the same hole four hundred and eleven times and has never once been asked what it is like down there.

And there is a rubber ring, the price of a chicken, that has not come for nine months.

THE STANDING

My name is Nader Fani and I have been two men.

I was a burglar in Tehran for twenty-seven years, on roofs and second-storey windows, and I was patient, and I was caught once, and the twelve years I was given for it I served four of. I came out of a hospital in Mashhad in the autumn of 1404 in a dead man's coat because it was on a chair and nobody was watching the chair, and I did not look at the colour of the turban that was folded on top of it.

It was black. Black means the Prophet's blood. I did not know that and found out on a bus.

I meant to be over a border in twelve days. I got off in a salt town at the end of a road in eastern Khorasan and nine men were waiting at the bus stop, and they took my bag off me by force, in the way of this country, and I was the custodian of their shrine for fourteen months.

What I left there: a woman who knew exactly what I was and did not say; a boy of nineteen who is building a life on a thing I told him and who will find out in his thirties; and a signed statement, in my own hand, certifying that no trace could be found of a man called Nader Fani.

What I took: a pair of shoes half a size too big, a name off an identity card, and one line out of a register from 1357 that I have not been able to put down.

I have been going west since. This is what happened next.

There is a poem about thirty birds who went a long way to find a king. I have never read it. A man at the top of a well told me a piece of it, and got it wrong, and I got the rest of it wrong afterwards, and there is a nightingale in it who will not go because he is in love with a flower.

I thought that was the stupid bird.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The injection is the medicine.

That is not a joke about Iran and it is not an insult to anybody. It is a real and observable fact about the country I come from: a consultation that does not end in a needle has, in the mind of a very large number of people, not happened. Tablets are advice. An *ampul* is treatment. You can cure a man with a pill and he will go home and tell his wife the doctor did nothing.

I have thought about why for most of my adult life, and the answer I have arrived at is the reason this book exists. Almost nobody, anywhere, is in a position to evaluate whether a treatment worked. What people *can* evaluate, with total confidence and considerable expertise, is whether the correct procedure was performed by somebody with the standing to perform it.

It is the same instrument that let a thief hold a mosque in the previous book. Here it is a syringe instead of Arabic, twelve hundred kilometres away, among entirely different people, doing exactly the same work.

I do not think that is a cynical observation, though I understand why it reads as one. I have come to think it is simply what human beings are: creatures who cannot assess the thing itself and have therefore become world-class at assessing the manner of it. It is why frauds work. It is also why a village with no doctor for eleven months still had a clinic that functioned, and I would like both halves of that sentence to be given equal weight.

The other thing this book is about is a rubber ring.

I wanted to write about the way politics is actually experienced by people who are not political, which is as a list of small missing objects. Nobody in Ab-Bidar says the word sanctions. They say *the gasket hasn't come*. They say *my sister's husband is going to Muscat in Farvardin, write it down for him*. A country runs on a list of small objects in the pockets of people who are travelling, and the arithmetic of a currency is a joke with a date attached — if you do

not put the date on the number, you are lying.

I have tried very hard to keep every political fact in this book attached to a price, an errand or an absence, and never to a speech. Where a character explains a policy, I have cut it. Where a woman explains why she now buys half the amount of the same thing, I have kept it.

A word on the qanat, since readers outside Iran will assume I invented it. I did not. There are tens of thousands of them. They are tunnels dug by hand, some of them before Islam, running for kilometres on a gradient of about one in a thousand, bringing water out of the foot of a mountain by gravity alone with no pump anywhere in the system. There is a vertical shaft every thirty or forty metres and from the air a qanat looks like the burrow of something enormous. They are maintained by *muqanni*, who go down on a rope, and the whole safety apparatus of a profession that predates the religion is a candle on a ledge, because carbon dioxide pools in the low sections and puts out a flame before it puts out a man. It kills people every year. It kills them in a good mood.

And on the birds: there is a poem by Farid ud-Din Attar, written around 1177 by a man from Neyshabur in Khorasan, in which all the birds of the world set out to find their king and each one first explains why it cannot go. The nightingale's excuse is that he loves a rose. Every reader will recognise somebody. The Glossary at the back says what the poem is; the book does not, because Nader has never read it and never will, and gets it wrong every time it is mentioned.

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

Chew Z

CONTENTS

PART ONE — THE BAG

1. A bag on a rack is a bag nobody has.	15
2. Never correct a man who is already sure.	17
3. The clinic has two rooms and one of them is locked.	19
4. Doctor. That is a thermometer.	21
5. They are not measuring the cure. They are measuring the ritual.	23
6. Everybody in this village knows and nobody has said it.	24
7. A debt is a debt, and it is the most expensive thing you can own.	26
8. Four hundred people and nobody to ask.	28

PART TWO — THE AMPOULE

- | | |
|---|----|
| 9. The trick works better on the well than it did in the mosque. | 32 |
| 10. The tea is two glasses now. I have made a note about supply. | 33 |
| 11. You cannot inject an orange twice. | 35 |
| 12. Twenty-seven years in other people's bedrooms not looking at things. | 36 |
| 13. The medicine did not come this month and nobody was surprised. | 37 |
| 14. Everyone who could leave has left, and one of them is in the back room. | 39 |
| 15. There is a bird in it that will not go. | 41 |
| 16. Sleep, and then sleep. | 43 |
| 17. The stuck door. | 44 |

PART THREE — THE WATER

18. Shares in time, unadjudicated since 1962.	47
19. Which of you last went down?	48
20. The number he knows.	50
21. They were not attending them. They were writing them down.	51
22. A hole in the ground is the only thing I was never afraid of.	53
23. Ninety feet is nothing. It is the last four that are the problem.	54
24. The handover.	56
25. He says I was talking for twenty minutes, and answering.	57
26. I bought oil for a dead man's shoes.	60

PART FOUR — THE WEEK

- | | |
|--|----|
| 27. She worked it out in week nine and said nothing for five. | 62 |
| 28. The arithmetic neither of us admitted to. | 63 |
| 29. Brief, warm, and afterwards we discussed the generator. | 65 |
| 30. The only person in eleven months who did not need her to
be good at anything. | 66 |
| 31. She took the week. | 67 |
| 32. | 68 |
| 33. The jokes came back two pages later, which is worse. | 70 |
| 34. The good one cannot be told either. | 71 |

PART FIVE — THE RECORD

- | | |
|---|----|
| 35. A stamp is more real than a fact. | 76 |
| 36. Eleven months in one night. | 77 |
| 37. What the boy's card said afterwards. | 79 |
| 38. I did not say goodbye, because saying goodbye requires
being somebody. | 80 |
| 39. Three men. | 81 |
| 40. A number in Shurabad, forwarded twice. | 82 |

PART ONE — THE BAG

Notes One to Eight

1.

A bag on a rack is a bag nobody has.

In Shurabad I wrote you lessons. I have since been informed, by a woman with a syringe, that I am not qualified to teach anything, which is correct.

So these are notes.

I came west out of Khorasan [kho-raa-SAAN] in the autumn with four hundred thousand tomans [toh-MAANS], a dead man's shoes and a name.

I want to be honest about the four hundred thousand, because a number in this country is a joke with a date attached and if you do not put the date on it you are lying. In the year I was born, four hundred thousand tomans would have bought a car. When I went into Vakilabad [va-keel-aa-BAAD] it was a month's rent in a bad part of Mashhad [mash-HAD]. When I came out it was a week of eating carefully. By the time I am writing this down for you it is a sandwich, and I want you to notice that I have not moved the money. The money sat perfectly still. Everything else went past it.

That is the whole of our national economics and I have never heard it explained better by anyone with a degree.

The name was Sayyid Hadi Vahedi [saa-YED HAA-dee vaa-heh-DEE], and I had it off an identity card in the pocket of a coat I stole, and I did not know one single thing about him except that he had been in a place in 1357 where my mother had also been, and that both of them were dead, and that this was not a coincidence, and that I was not equipped to find out why.

I want to be clear about the not-equipped. In the films the man goes looking and there are records and a helpful clerk and a box in a basement. I went looking the way an actual person goes looking, which is to say I sat in tea houses and asked, badly.

Four towns. Eleven days. I got: a man who knew a Vahedi in Sabzevar who turned out to be a plumber; a very long and structurally beautiful story about somebody's brother-in-law's land dispute which had nothing to do with anything and which I listened

to for ninety minutes because I was raised properly; and one old man who said *oh, the seminary, they all went out to the villages that year* and then would not say another word because his daughter came in.

I am not a detective. I am a man who is good at waiting in a stairwell. There is no stairwell in this and I have been telling you that since the first page.

The bag was on the rack over row eleven on a bus out of Sabzevar.

Now. I had been out of that shrine for ten weeks and I had done nothing at all. I want that on the record because it is the only genuinely virtuous stretch of my adult life. Ten weeks, no doors, no windows, nothing off a rack, nothing out of a pocket. I paid for things. I stood in queues. It was extraordinarily boring and I was rather proud of it.

Then a bag came round the corner of the aisle at head height on a rack and nobody was under it.

I have thought about this a great deal and the conclusion I have reached is not flattering and I am giving it to you anyway, because you are going to need it later when you find out what I did with a prescription pad. Here is the conclusion: I did not take that bag because I needed it. I had four hundred thousand tomans and no plan. I took it because there is a thing in me that goes off like a smoke alarm when an object is unattended, and it has been going off since I was seventeen, and in ten weeks of being a good man it had not stopped once. It had simply been waiting.

I got off two stops early with it under my arm and walked until the road stopped having houses on it, and then I sat on a culvert and opened it.

A stethoscope. A blood-pressure cuff, the old kind, with the bulb perished at the neck and mended with electrical tape, which I want you to hold onto. A prescription pad with the top sheet torn off. Four ballpoint pens, one working. A shirt. A bag of pistachios, opened.

And a Ministry of Health identity card, laminated, curling at one corner, belonging to a man born eleven months before me.

I sat on that culvert for a long time.

Because you have to understand what I had been doing for ten weeks, and what I had been doing was walking around this country as Nader Fani, and Nader Fani cannot open a bank account, cannot rent a room with a contract, cannot be treated in a hospital, cannot be stopped in the street by a man with a clipboard, and cannot, above all, ask a question about a dead cleric without immediately becoming an interesting person.

Nobody ever asks a doctor what he is doing there.

I put the pistachios in my coat and threw the bag in a ditch and kept the card, and I would like the record to show that at that point I had no plan whatsoever, and that the entirety of my intention was to be able to say a sentence with a title in it if a policeman ever stopped me.

That is the truth and I know how it sounds.

Everything else — the woman, the boy, the water, eleven months of a man's professional life rewritten in one night at a desk — all of that came out of a smoke alarm going off over row eleven, and I did not decide any of it, and I have never once been able to work out at which exact point I could have.

2.

Never correct a man who is already sure.

Ab-Bidar [aab-bee-DAAR] means water-waking, which is the sort of name you give a place when the water is doing something remarkable, and it has been doing progressively less of it for about forty years.

Four hundred people. Pistachio and a little wheat. It sits on a qanat [gha-NAAT] — I will explain the qanat properly later because it deserves better than a clause, and because a man is going to take me down one — and the road in is the road out, which is a thing I appear to keep arranging for myself.

I got there at dusk on a Thursday because of course I did.

I had intended to sleep somewhere and go on in the morning. I want to say that plainly since nobody believes it: four days, tops. I had the card and I had a vague idea about the seminary boys of 1357 and I thought a village that old might have somebody who remembered, and that was the entire strategy, and it was not a strategy, it was a shrug with a bus ticket.

There is a shop at the top of the village that is also the bus stop and also, I later discovered, where the mail goes. A man of about sixty was sitting outside it on a stack of pallets with a radio going.

He looked at me. He looked at the bag, which by then was a plastic one with a stethoscope and a cuff in it, because I had kept those, because I am what I am.

And he stood up.

I want to describe the specific thing that happened next, because it is the whole of this book and it is not the thing that happened in Shurabad.

In Shurabad they took one look at a black turban and made an assumption. That is fast and it is stupid and a man can ride it.

This man did not make an assumption. He said:

“Doctor? They said Thursday.”

They said Thursday.

He was not guessing. He was *confirming*. *Somewhere in an office in a provincial capital, a person I have never met had written a date on a form, and that date had travelled to a village of four hundred people, and it had been discussed, and it had been waited on, and it had arrived before I did.*

They had been expecting a locum in Ab-Bidar for eleven months. They had been told about six of them. Five had not come. The sixth was me, and I was standing at the top of the road on the correct day of the week, with a stethoscope in a plastic bag, and I had not said one word.

I would like to explain something to you about lying, since I have now spent some years at it professionally and this is the most useful thing I know.

The hardest lie in the world is one you have to start.

The easiest thing in the world is a lie somebody else has already started, that has been going eleven months, that four hundred people have discussed at length, that has a date on it, and that has produced in every one of them a fully formed picture of a man — his manner, his likely age, whether he will stay, what he will be like about the drug cupboard — a picture assembled entirely out of hope and previous disappointments, into which a stranger has only to walk without contradicting anything.

I did not have to build anything. I had to not knock anything over.

He said, "The nurse is still down there. She's always still down there."

And I said, "Then I'll go down."

Four days.

3.

The clinic has two rooms and one of them is locked.

The health post of Ab-Bidar is a single-storey block at the bottom of the village with a green cross painted on the wall by somebody who was not a sign painter and knew it.

Inside: a waiting bench, a consulting room with a desk and an examination couch and a curtain on a rail, a dispensary the size of a wardrobe, a toilet, and at the back a door that was shut.

Let me do the inventory the way I do inventories, because you learn a building by what it does not have.

The generator was outside on a slab, and it was running, at six in the evening, which told me the mains had gone off at some point in the afternoon and nobody had remarked on it. There was a diesel drum beside it with a stick in it for measuring, and the stick had a mark on it in marker pen, and the mark was low.

The refrigerator was running off the generator and had a padlock on it. Not a lock on the room — a lock on the *fridge*. That is a building where something in the cold chain is worth more than the building.

The drug cupboard had a printed list taped inside the door, and forty per cent of the list had a pencil line through it, and beside eleven of the lines somebody had written a date. I read the dates. The oldest was fourteen months back. Somebody had been recording, every single time, the day a thing stopped being available. Not complaining. *Recording.*

I have been in a great many buildings uninvited and I know what a building looks like when a person has decided to hold it up personally.

The blood-pressure cuff on the desk had a perished bulb mended with electrical tape.

I stood there with the identical mend in my hand, in my plastic bag, off a bag off a rack, and I understood two things at once: that this is what the whole country looks like from the inside, and that whoever ran this room had run out of new equipment at approximately the same time as every other clinic in every other village on this plateau.

The back door was locked. I noticed it the way you notice a locked door, which is to say completely, immediately, and with a small unwelcome flare of professional interest.

Then she came out of the dispensary with a tray.

She was about my age or younger, in a white coat over a dark manteau, with her sleeves pushed to the elbow and her forearms wet to the wrist, and she looked at me for slightly longer than a person looks at a stranger.

"You're the locum."

"I am."

"Card."

Now. In Shurabad nobody in fourteen months asked me for a single piece of paper. Not one. I had a black turban and that was the document.

Four minutes into this one and a woman with wet forearms was holding out her hand.

I gave it to her. She read it. She read all of it, including the numbers along the bottom, which nobody does, and she turned it over and read the back, which has nothing on it.

Then she gave it back and said, "Nasrin Dastyar [nas-REEN dast-YAAR]. I'm the nurse. Have you eaten?"

And that is how I met the only person who has ever caught me, and she caught me in the first four minutes, and it then took her nine weeks to decide what to do about it, and I spent every one of those nine weeks believing I had walked it perfectly.

4.

Doctor. That is a thermometer.

The first patient came at twenty past eight the next morning and I had been awake since four working out how to stand.

That is not a joke. I want you to understand the method, because it is all I have. I cannot read a drug name. I have eleven years of school Arabic and no biology whatsoever. What I have is twenty-seven years of being in places I was not qualified to be in, and the entire craft of that is physical: where you put your hands, how long you take, whether you look at the door.

So at four in the morning I stood in that consulting room in the dark and worked out the choreography. Sit. Do not sit behind the desk — behind the desk is an official, beside the desk is a man. Let the patient talk for longer than is comfortable. Wash your hands where they can see you do it, because it is the one medical act everybody in the world recognises.

An old woman with a shoulder. I did the choreography. It went beautifully.

Then I picked up a thermometer and looked at it and turned it over, because I had never held that kind, and I was trying to work out which end.

And Nasrin, from the doorway, without any particular emphasis, in front of the patient, said:

"Doctor. That is a thermometer."

The old woman laughed. Actually laughed, out loud, and then apologised to me and laughed again.

I want to record my exact interior state, which was: complete calm. Not because I am brave. Because I had already understood, in the four seconds available, that a nurse who corrects a doctor in front of a patient is a nurse who has done it before, to somebody else, many times, and that a village which laughs at it is a village where this is a known and enjoyed feature of the clinic.

I was not being exposed. I was being *inducted*.

So I said, "It is. And it is upside down, and I was testing you, and you passed."

And the old woman thought this was the funniest thing that had happened in Ab-Bidar that year, and it was around the village by lunchtime, and by the end of the week two separate people had told me the story of it, one of whom improved it considerably.

Nasrin did not smile. She looked at me for about a second and a half — I have been looked at like that once before, by a woman on her knees washing a floor, and I did not enjoy it then either — and she took the thermometer out of my hand, and she did the old woman's shoulder herself, correctly, in ninety seconds, while I stood there being the doctor.

That was the arrangement, established on day one, and neither of us proposed it and neither of us ever put it into words:

She did the medicine.

I did the room.

And for about nine weeks I was extremely pleased with myself about how well I had negotiated that, and it was not a negotiation, it was a woman deciding what she was going to allow, and I was the last person in that building to work it out.

5.

They are not measuring the cure. They are measuring the ritual.

On the third morning a man of about fifty came in with a cough he had been carrying for eleven days, and I did the choreography, and Nasrin looked at him from the doorway and said it was a chest thing and he should have the tablets and drink water and come back on Sunday.

And he said, “No ampul [am-POOL]?”

I want to stop here and explain something about this country to you, because if you do not understand this you will not understand a single thing that happens in this book.

In Iran, the injection is the medicine.

I do not mean that injections are used. I mean that in the mind of a very large number of people, a consultation that does not end in a needle has not happened. Tablets are advice. A *serum* [seh-ROM] — a drip, a bag on a stand, an hour on a bed with a line in your arm — is treatment. An *ampul* is *serious* treatment. You can give a man a pill that will cure him completely and he will go home and tell his wife the doctor did nothing, and he will be back on Sunday, and he will be back on Sunday having got better, and he will still tell you the doctor did nothing.

I have thought about why for a long time. Some of it is that the needle hurts, and we are a people who understand paying. Some of it is a century of pharmacies where the man behind the counter would inject you for the price of a sandwich and no appointment. Some of it is simply that a thing you can *see going in* is real in a way a tablet is not.

But the part that concerns me — the part I sat up with — is this.

They were not assessing whether he would get better. They had no way to assess that; nobody in that room including the patient could evaluate a course of treatment. What they were assessing, with total confidence and considerable expertise, was whether *the correct procedure had been performed by a person with the standing to perform it.*

The needle is the posture.

I sat behind a desk in a village of four hundred people and felt the floor of my life tilt very slightly, because I had heard this before. I had heard it in a mosque with two hundred and forty people in it, when I said four clauses of Arabic I had invented on the spot and a man in the fourth row wept about a brother I have never heard of.

They were not listening to the words. There were perhaps eleven men in that building who could have followed the words.

They were listening to the posture.

And here in a clinic on a plateau, twelve hundred kilometres away, four hundred entirely different people were doing the identical thing with a syringe.

I have never got over this and I do not expect to. It is either the most cynical observation I have ever made or the most forgiving one, and I have gone round it a thousand times and I still cannot tell you which, and I have come to suspect that it is both and that this is simply what human beings are: creatures who cannot evaluate the thing itself and have therefore become world-class at evaluating the *manner* of it.

Which is very good news if you are a fraud.

And which is, I would like you to notice, also the reason that a village with no doctor for eleven months still had a clinic that worked.

Nasrin said, "He'll have the ampul."

She gave it to him. It was, I later learned, a vitamin.

He went home extremely satisfied and told his wife the new doctor was thorough.

6.

Everybody in this village knows and nobody has said it.

I got the back door open on the fifth night, which is four nights longer than it should have taken me and I want credit for the delay.

It was not a good lock. It was a lock that had been put on a door in a hurry by somebody with the wrong screws. I stood in front of it for two nights telling myself that a man who has been walking around for ten weeks not taking things should not begin again with an interior door in a building he has been given the keys to.

Then on the fifth night the generator went off at eleven, and in the dark I heard a chair move behind that door.

Not a rat. Not the building. A chair, taking a man's weight, being pushed back on a tiled floor.

I had the door in about forty seconds and I am not proud of the forty seconds either.

The room was a store, converted. A bed, a chair, a table with a lamp on it, a stack of journals in English with their spines gone soft, a plate. And in the chair, in a cardigan, with his hands on his knees, was a man of about fifty with a very good face who looked up at me without any surprise at all and said:

"You're late."

I said nothing.

"They said Thursday," he said. "Six of you. Five never came. I said to Nasrin, the sixth won't come either, and she said she would take the bet, and now I owe her a hundred thousand tomans, which she will not take, and this is the entire economy of my life."

He was funny. That is the thing that took me apart. He was, in that first ninety seconds, genuinely funny — precise, dry, timing like a door closing — and he was completely lucid, and he told me his name was Behnam Ardalani [beh-NAAM ar-da-laa-NEE] and that he had been the doctor here for eleven years and that he was very glad I had come.

And then, perhaps four minutes later, in the middle of a sentence about the drug list, he stopped and asked me whether the car had been sent for the woman from the upper village, and it took me a long time to establish that the woman from the upper village had been sent in a car in 2019.

Then he came back. That is the part I was not ready for. He came back, and he *knew he had gone*, and he put his hand over his eyes for a moment and said, "Ah. Forgive me. It does that."

Eleven months.

Eleven months a man with a real degree and eleven years in that village had been sitting in a store room behind his own clinic, and a nurse had been walking the medicine out through the front, and four hundred people had said nothing.

I want to be exact about the *nothing*, because when I tell this story people assume a conspiracy and there was no conspiracy. There was no meeting. Nobody was sworn to anything. What there was, in a village of four hundred, was a completely shared and entirely unspoken understanding that the arithmetic came out like this:

Report it, and the Ministry has to fill the post.

The Ministry cannot fill the post. It has been trying for eleven months and before that it had this man for eleven years and it will not find another.

So: report it and the clinic closes, and the nearest one is a hundred and forty kilometres, and there is one car in the upper village and the road is what it is.

I have heard men in Tehran talk about the moral fibre of this country in the same tone they use about the traffic. Not one of them has ever had to run that sum.

And I sat down on the end of a bed in a store room and understood, with a clarity I have rarely enjoyed, that I was not the impostor in this building.

I was the second coat of paint.

7.

A debt is a debt, and it is the most expensive thing you can own.

She came in behind me and did not raise her voice, which I have since learned is the frightening version.

"You broke my door."

"It wasn't locked properly."

"It was locked properly. I locked it." She looked at Behnam, who had gone somewhere else again and was reading the same page of a journal for the fourth time. "Come out."

We stood in the dark consulting room with the generator off and a torch on the desk pointing at the ceiling, which is how everyone in this country has every serious conversation.

She gave me the terms. She did not apologise for any of it and she did not explain herself once, and it took her about two minutes.

Eleven months. She writes the notes. She takes the decisions. She signs his name — she said this flatly, the way you would say you take the bins out — and she has signed it four hundred and eleven times, and she knows the number, and I have thought about the fact that she knows the number more than I have thought about almost anything else in this account.

Referrals go out under his number. The drug orders go out under his number. The vaccination returns, the maternal health returns, the quarterly, all of it.

"And now," she said, "you."

"Me."

"Two signatures instead of one." She folded her arms. "Yours is easier. Yours is new, so nobody in the province has fourteen years of it on file to compare."

I said, "You've thought about this."

"I have had eleven months."

Here is what I said, and I want it written down because I said it in a good voice and I meant every word of it and it was the single most consequential lie I have ever told, and it was not even a lie, which is the problem:

I said, "Why are you doing it?"

And she said, "Because he signed my papers."

That is the whole of it. In 1387 she was nineteen years old with a dead father and a certificate from a nursing school in Sabzevar that

needed a physician's counter-signature to be worth anything, and there was a man in an office who was going to ask her for something in exchange, and there was a man in this village who signed it in forty seconds without looking up and never mentioned it again for sixteen years.

"So he signed one paper," she said, "and I have signed four hundred and eleven."

And she looked at me with an expression I could not read then and can read now.

"That is not generosity. That is arithmetic. He is ahead of me by a very long way and he always will be, and one day he will die and the ledger will close and I will still be behind."

My father kept a ledger with God, out loud, at dinner, for fifty-one years, and he was always slightly ahead.

I have met exactly one person in my life who kept the same books and came out the other side of them, and she was standing in a dark room in a village of four hundred people telling me, without any self-pity whatsoever, that she was going to lose.

I should have got on the bus on Sunday.

8.

Four hundred people and nobody to ask.

The waiting room of a village clinic is not a waiting room. It is the only room in that village where a person can say something out loud to somebody who is not related to them.

I had understood this within a week and I had understood, by about day nine, that roughly a third of what came through that door was not medical at all, and that I had spent fourteen months in a mosque being trained for precisely this and had not known it.

A husband and wife, married four years, no children. She had been to Mashhad twice. He had not been anywhere. The entire village had an opinion, most of the opinions concerned her, and the two of them sat in front of me holding a folder of test results that neither of them could read and that I could not read either.

I asked how long they had been staying with his mother.

There was a silence of a quality I recognised from a house in a salt town.

Six years. One room. His mother the other side of the wall, and his mother's opinion had been the loudest of all the opinions.

I sent the folder to the city with a note on it, which Nasrin corrected before it went, and then I did the only thing I actually know how to do, which was to have a very long and enormously boring conversation with his mother about her hip.

They have a daughter now. I heard about it two years later, in a different province, from a man who had no idea who he was talking to.

Then a man came in who was absolutely certain his neighbour had put the eye on him, with a specific and, he wished me to understand, extremely localised effect. He wanted an ampul. He was not embarrassed. Nothing in this country is less embarrassing than the evil eye; it is a weather report.

I asked him how long the two of them had not been speaking.

Nine months. Over a wall.

I would like to tell you I resolved it with wisdom. I resolved it by telling him, with enormous gravity, that this was well known, that the eye of a man you owe a conversation to is the strongest kind, and that the treatment was to go and have the conversation, and that if it did not work he should come back and we would try the other thing.

He came back four days later to tell me it had worked and to ask whether the ampul was still available, and I said it was and he had it, and it was a vitamin, and he was delighted.

And then, on the Thursday, a girl of nineteen, married eleven weeks, brought in by nobody, having walked.

I am not going to write down what she had been told. She had been told it by three separate aunts, in good faith, and it was wrong in three different directions, and two of the three versions were

frightening enough that she had not slept properly since the wedding.

I sent for Nasrin, because there is a limit and I had reached it, and Nasrin took her into the dispensary and shut the door and was in there for fifty minutes.

When the girl came out she looked like a person who had been let out of something.

Nasrin came and stood in the consulting-room doorway afterwards with her arms folded and said, "Nobody has done that here for eleven months."

"Done what?"

"Told a nineteen-year-old the truth about her own body." She was not angry with me. It took me a while to work out that she was not angry with anybody in the village either. "There is no one to ask. There is a clinic and it is shut and there are three aunts."

Four hundred people.

I sat in that room afterwards and laughed, once, out loud, on my own, because the funniest thing I have ever been part of is that a man who went through six hundred windows was, at that moment, the closest thing four hundred people had to somewhere to put a question.

And then I stopped laughing, which is the other half of the same thing, and I have never been able to separate them since.

PART TWO — THE AMPOULE

Notes Nine to Seventeen

9.

The trick works better on the well than it did in the mosque.

In the third week two families had a shouting match in my waiting room about a boundary that had nothing to do with either of them and everything to do with a marriage in 1398.

I want to be clear that I did not intervene out of any impulse toward peace. I intervened because there were nine people waiting and one of them was a child with a temperature, and because forty minutes of shouting in a room with a curtain in it is forty minutes in which nothing else can be done.

I have some experience of this. I spent fourteen months in a place where settling disputes was three-quarters of the job, and I settled a wall, a goat and a foreskin, and I did it with a method I did not invent and do not fully understand, and the method is this:

Listen to the first man for a very long time. Do not agree with him. Then listen to the second man for exactly as long, which they will both be counting. Then say nothing at all for a while. Then ask one question that moves the property.

In the salt town the question was *which of you built it*, and the answer was their father, in 1974, and it was over.

Here the question was *how long has the child been standing there*.

That is all. That is the whole intervention. The child in question belonged to the second man's brother and had been on her feet in a corner of my waiting room for thirty-five minutes with a temperature of thirty-nine, and neither of them had looked at her once, and when I asked it both of them turned round at the same time.

It stopped like a tap.

The first man carried her in himself. The second man went and got the car. They did not resolve the boundary — the boundary is still there and I expect it will outlive everybody involved — but they did not shout in my waiting room again, and by the following week they were speaking, and by Nowruz [now-ROOZ] one of them had done something involving pistachios that I never got to the bottom of.

Nasrin watched the whole thing from the dispensary door with a tray in her hands.

She said nothing at the time. She said nothing that day, or the next.

On the second evening, while counting ampoules, without looking up, she said:

"Where did you learn that."

"Learn what?"

"That." She wrote a number down. "The waiting. The *nothing*. You did nothing for eleven seconds in the middle of two men shouting and it worked better than anything I have seen a person do in this building."

I said something modest.

And she said, "It's revolting, actually," and went on counting.

That is the first entry in a long file, and it took me an embarrassing amount of time to work out what kind of file it was, because I had a category for a woman who insults you and a category for a woman who is interested and it had never once occurred to me that they could be the same file.

I had, at that point, been divorced for fifteen years and had conducted perhaps thirty relationships and had considered myself something of a professional.

I want that on the record before we go any further, because of what happens.

10.

The tea is two glasses now. I have made a note about supply.

Here is my note about the tea. I am reproducing it exactly, because I wrote it in the back of the drug ledger and I still have the page and it is the single most humiliating document I own.

Tea — two glasses now, mornings, most days. Check whether the allocation has changed or whether the shop is doing something. If the allocation has not changed, we are drinking the reserve.

That is what I wrote. In week five.

I would like to defend myself and I am going to try, because I think the defence is actually interesting.

My entire professional education is my mother's, and my mother's method had exactly one instrument in it, which was: *what does this person want from me?* That is what she read across a room in four seconds at a wedding. That is what I read in a stairwell for twenty-seven years. It is a superb instrument. It has never once failed me.

It is also a needle that only moves in one direction, and Nasrin Dastyar wanted nothing from me at all.

She had a broken doctor who needed holding up and four hundred people who needed holding up and a Ministry that needed a signature and a village that needed the door to open at eight, and she had decided — I understood this much later — that the one thing she was not going to do, ever, under any circumstances, was want something from a man who was leaving on Thursday.

So the reading was zero. And my needle sat at zero. And I wrote a note about supply.

There is more of this. Over the following month:

Second chair moved into the consulting room. Ask about it — is somebody coming from the province?

Nobody was coming from the province.

N. staying late Tuesdays. Possible she is doing the quarterly returns early because of the audit. She was not doing the quarterly returns. The quarterly returns had been done for a fortnight and were in the drawer.

N. asked what I eat. Note: check whether the food is coming out of her own money, because the allowance for the post has not been paid since Tir.

The allowance for the post had not been paid since Tir. That part was correct. That is the only part that was correct.

I ran a professional surveillance operation on a woman for six weeks, wrote down every observation, and arrived at a set of conclusions about logistics.

You are going to read the rest of this book knowing something I did not, and I want you to enjoy it, because I have had twenty years to be embarrassed about it and I am no longer using it.

11.

You cannot inject an orange twice.

In the sixth week she decided I was going to learn to give an injection.

Her reasoning was operational and she stated it in one sentence: there are days when there are forty people and one of her, and a doctor who cannot give an intramuscular is a doctor who is decorative.

I said that I was not sure this was a good idea.

She said, "Neither am I. Sit down."

The orange came first. There is an orange in the teaching of every nurse in the world and I would like to know who started it. You are aiming for a clean approach at ninety degrees, and the orange tells you nothing whatsoever about a human being except that you can hold a syringe, and after four goes the orange has gone soft and starts to leak and she said, with no expression at all:

"You cannot inject an orange twice. Everyone finds that out."

Then a towel over her own thigh, and me practising the angle against it, which is fine, which is completely fine, which is a professional teaching a colleague, and which involved a woman sitting on a desk with her leg out and a man kneeling in front of it holding a needle, in a room with a curtain in it, at eight o'clock at night, with a generator going.

Neither of us said anything about that.

I want to be accurate: neither of us said anything about it *at enormous length*. There was a quantity of not-saying-anything in that room that you could have weighed. She corrected my wrist twice. The second time she took hold of my wrist to do it and then put it down slightly faster than she had picked it up.

Then a patient. A man with an antibiotic, upper outer quadrant, and Nasrin standing behind my shoulder saying *slower* and *no* and *there* in a low flat voice, and the man saying it was fine, it was fine, he had had hundreds.

I was competent by the third one.

She was annoyed about it and did not conceal this. She said, "You have good hands," and then heard herself say it, and then said, "for a man who has clearly never done a day's work," and went to wash something.

And I wrote in my file that evening: *N. appears frustrated by the pace of the training. Consider asking whether the workload is the issue.*

12.

Twenty-seven years in other people's bedrooms not looking at things.

I have to say something about the buttock, and I am going to say it plainly, because it is genuinely the central instrument of medicine in this country and because pretending otherwise would be a strange kind of squeamishness in a book with everything else in it.

The intramuscular injection in Iran goes in the upper outer quadrant of the buttock. This means that a very large number of interactions between a doctor and a patient in this country end with a stranger partly undressed and facing a wall.

There is an etiquette. It is precise, it is universal, nobody has ever written it down, and every single person in the room knows it perfectly. You do not speak while it is happening. You talk before and after and not during. The patient looks at the wall. You look at the quadrant and nothing else, and there is a way of looking at nothing else which is not the same as looking away, and if you get it wrong in either direction the room turns to ice.

And I was good at it immediately.

I want to tell you what I felt about being good at it, which was not pride. It was something much closer to nausea, and it took me a

fortnight to work out why, and when I worked it out I stopped enjoying that particular joke about myself.

I have spent twenty-seven years in other people's bedrooms not looking at things.

That is a skill. It is a real skill and it took years and I was excellent at it. You are in a room at two in the morning where a woman's clothes are on a chair and her jewellery is on a table and a photograph of her children is beside the bed, and you take the jewellery, and you have trained yourself out of the entire rest of the room — every human trace of it — because the ones who look are the ones who start feeling things, and the ones who start feeling things get caught or get sentimental or get religion.

Twenty-seven years of professional non-seeing, and it turned out to be exactly, precisely the competence required to give a frightened stranger an injection with dignity.

I am not going to draw a conclusion from that. I have tried, several times, and every conclusion I reach is either too flattering or too cheap. I am putting it in the file the way I put the funeral in the file in the salt town, and if you want to make something of it you are welcome.

What I will say is that a man came in during the eighth week, sixty-one years old, extremely embarrassed, with a boil in a location he could not bring himself to name, and I dealt with the whole thing without once making it possible for him to feel ridiculous, and he shook my hand on the way out with both of his.

And on the way home I thought: *I could not have done that at thirty. I would have made a joke and the joke would have been good and he would have gone home and not come back.*

13.

The medicine did not come this month and nobody was surprised.

I want to explain the shortages, because everybody outside this country explains them wrong and everybody inside it has stopped explaining them at all.

There is no announcement. That is the first thing. Nothing is ever declared unavailable. What happens is that an order goes to the province and comes back with eleven of the fourteen items, and the three that are missing have no note against them, and you order them again the following month and get nine of the fourteen, and at no point does anybody tell you anything, and you find out what you have by opening the box.

The pencil lines on the cupboard list were Nasrin's, over fourteen months.

Second thing: the missing items are never the cheap ones and never quite the vital ones. They are the middle. The specific insulin rather than insulin. The paediatric formulation rather than the adult. The thing that has one manufacturer in Europe and a licence agreement that went through a bank.

I asked her once what actually happens, expecting to be told about politics.

She said: "The money leaves here in rials and has to be dollars by the time it reaches Germany, and there is no straight road, so it goes through two other countries and a man in each of them, and every one of them takes something, and sometimes the last bank looks at the paperwork and says no, and then it comes back, and by the time it comes back the price has changed and the order has to be done again."

Then she said, "The autoclave has needed a gasket since Bahman. It is a rubber ring. It costs the price of a chicken."

Nine months. A rubber ring.

That is the whole of it. Nobody in that clinic ever said the word sanctions, or America, or the Ministry, or the government, in fourteen weeks, in my hearing, once. What they said was: *the gasket hasn't come*. What they said was: *ask if the pharmacy in Sabzevar has any and I will pay the difference*. What they said was: *my sister's husband is going to Muscat in Farvardin, write it down for him*.

A country runs on a list of small objects in the pockets of people who are travelling.

And the third thing, which is the one that matters for what happens later: *when a thing is missing, the person in the room does not blame the state.* They blame the clinic. They blame the doctor. Because the state is weather and the doctor is standing in front of them.

Nasrin had absorbed eleven months of that personally, on behalf of a man in a back room, for a rubber ring.

I asked her, in the eleventh week, why she did not simply tell them.

She said, "Tell them what? That there is no doctor, no gasket and no money?" She put a box down. "They know. If I say it out loud they have to do something about knowing it. This way they can go on not doing anything, which is the only thing anybody here can afford."

That is the most sophisticated political statement I have ever heard and she made it about a rubber ring while doing stock.

14.

Everyone who could leave has left, and one of them is in the back room.

Ab-Bidar has had six doctors since the revolution and I got the whole list one evening from Nasrin in about four minutes, in the flat tone of a woman reading a stock take.

The first stayed nine years and died here. The second stayed two and went to Mashhad. The third stayed eleven months and went to Tehran and then to Muscat and is, by all accounts, extremely comfortable. The fourth did not come. The fifth came, stayed a fortnight, and left in the night without saying anything to anybody, and they found the key on the desk.

The sixth was Behnam Ardalani, who came in 1393 for a two-year rural service posting and was still there eleven years later.

I asked why he stayed and she looked at me as if I had asked something obscene, and then she realised I meant it, and then she thought about it properly, and then she said: "Because after about the fourth year, leaving would have been a thing he did to us."

Now.

I could give you a paragraph here about the state of medicine in this country and I am not going to, because the moment a man in my position starts explaining a policy the book dies. What I will give you is arithmetic, because arithmetic is what everybody in that village actually did.

A doctor in a village post is paid a salary set by a Ministry. That number is written down once and then the year happens to it. Behnam told me, on a good evening, in a completely clear voice, what he had been paid in his first year and what it was worth, and then what he was paid in his eleventh year and what that was worth, and the second number was a quarter of the first, and nobody had ever cut his pay. Nobody had done anything to him at all. He had simply stood still for eleven years while the floor moved.

He had a colleague from Mashhad who left in 1398 and is in Oman, and another in Canada, and one in Germany who is not permitted to practise and manages a shop.

And in the middle of telling me this — quite lucid, quite funny, doing an impression of the man in Germany — he stopped and asked whether the car had been sent for the woman from the upper village.

I said it had.

He said, “Good. Good,” and was very relieved, and I have said it every time since, and I will go on saying it.

Here is what I want you to understand about Behnam Ardalani, because it is the argument of this book and it is not a sad thing, it is a *hard* thing.

He is not a tragedy. He was not destroyed by anything. He did eleven years of work in a village of four hundred people and delivered a number of children whose names he can still list, and then something happened in his head that happens to people, and it happened here rather than somewhere with a system around it.

The scandal is not that he broke. Men break. The scandal is that a village of four hundred people did the sums and worked out that a

broken doctor was worth more to them than an honest report, and they were *right*. That is what I cannot get past. They were not being sentimental and they were not covering anything up. They ran the numbers and the numbers said keep him.

And they were right, and I know they were right, because I was the sixth locum they were promised and I was a burglar.

15.

There is a bird in it that will not go.

The qanat-keeper of Ab-Bidar is a man called Yadollah [ya-dol-LAAH], which means Hand of God, and he digs wells, and he has never once in his life remarked on this.

Seventy-four. Fourth generation on the same water. He came to the clinic about his knee, refused every single thing I suggested, and stayed two hours.

I liked him immediately and he did not like me at all, and that combination has always been my favourite kind of conversation.

He asked what I was doing here. Not *what brings you*. What are you doing here. And when I gave him the version I had been giving people he listened to all of it and then said, "Mm," in a way that closed the subject and also filed it.

Then, because I had asked about the water, he talked for an hour and a half about the qanat, and I am going to give you the short form because you need it for later.

A qanat is a tunnel. Somebody, in this case about eight hundred years ago, walked out into a desert, found the place where water sits under the gravel at the foot of the mountains, dug a shaft down to it, and then dug a tunnel from that shaft *sideways*, on a gradient of about one in a thousand, for as many kilometres as it took to reach where people wanted to live. Along the way they sank a vertical shaft every thirty or forty metres to get the spoil out and the air in. From the surface you see a line of holes in the ground going off to the horizon like something a very large animal did.

There is no pump. There has never been a pump. The water walks out of the mountain on a slope a man dug by hand with a lamp and a pick, and it has been walking for eight hundred years, and it stops if nobody goes down and cleans it.

Yadollah has gone down four hundred and some times. He knows the number.

I said the number out loud, involuntarily, because I had heard a number like it in a dark consulting room three weeks earlier, and he asked me what was funny, and I said nothing.

Then he told me about the birds.

I want to record this exactly as it happened, because I have since been told, several times, by people who know, that he had it substantially wrong.

He said there is a poem, and in the poem all the birds of the world decide to go and find their king, who lives a very long way away past seven — he could not remember what. Seven somethings. Deserts, he thought. And before they set off, each bird stands up and explains why it in particular cannot go.

He could remember two of them.

There is a duck, who says the water is his whole life and he cannot leave it and he is already clean, which Yadollah thought was extremely funny for reasons he did not explain and I did not ask about, given his profession.

And there is a nightingale, who says he cannot go because he is in love with a rose. That is his excuse. He loves one flower in one garden so much that he has nothing left over for a journey, and he says this in front of everybody, and — this is the part Yadollah dwelt on — *he says it beautifully*. He makes a case for staying that is more moving than anything any of the travelling birds say. And then they go without him.

I asked what happens to the nightingale.

Yadollah said he had no idea. He said nobody ever tells you that part.

And I said — and I would give a great deal to take this back — I said, “Well, he sounds like a fool.”

Yadollah looked at me for a moment.

Then he said, “The rose only lasts a week, and he knows that, and he stays anyway. You can call it what you like.”

And he got up and refused a prescription and went home on a knee that needed an operation he was never going to have.

I want to note, because I was not able to note it at the time, who was in that clinic while this conversation was happening.

A nurse in the dispensary who had not left this village in eleven months.

A doctor in a back room who had not left it in eleven months either.

An old man with a ruined knee who had gone down the same hole four hundred times.

And a man passing through, who intended to be gone by Thursday, and who was the only person in the building who thought the nightingale was a fool.

16.

Sleep, and then sleep.

In the eighth week I asked her — idly, over the returns, making conversation — what she would do if she got a week.

She did not look up. She said, “Sleep.”

I said, and I thought I was being charming, “A week is a long time to sleep.”

And she said, “Then I would wake up, and I would find out what I am like, and then I would go back to sleep.”

I laughed.

She did not.

It went past me completely. I want to be exact about the mechanism of it going past me, because it is not that I was callous; it is that my instrument reported nothing. I heard a tired woman

make a dry remark, and dry remarks from tired people are the native language of every room I have ever been in, and I answered it in kind and we went on to the vaccination returns.

What she had actually said, out loud, to a man she had known seven weeks, was that she did not know who she was any more and had not for some time and had a theory that the answer was underneath the exhaustion and that she was afraid of it.

She said it once, flatly, and never again.

I have gone back over that conversation more times than I have gone back over the qanat, and I have gone back over the qanat a great deal.

17.

The stuck door.

The mains went off at nine and the generator would not start, which happened perhaps twice a month, and we were doing the ampoule count because the audit was coming and the count had to be right.

The dispensary is a room the size of a wardrobe with a door that has swollen every winter for nine years, and when the power goes and the building cools the door does what it does.

It stuck.

Not dramatically. It stuck the way a door sticks, which is to say we could have got it open in about ninety seconds with a shoulder, and we discovered this later, and neither of us tried it for eleven minutes.

There was a torch on the shelf pointing at the ceiling.

I want to describe the geometry of that room accurately because it is the entire scene. Two people, one metre of floor between the shelving units, a box of ampoules on a stool, and a clipboard. To read the clipboard she had to be at the shelf. To count the shelf I had to be at the box. Each of us moved past the other four times in eleven minutes and every single time it was necessary.

And we argued about stock levels.

For eleven minutes. In detail. With considerable heat. Whether the vitamin B compound should be counted against the quarterly or carried, whether the province rounds down, whether the four ampoules that went to the upper village in Aban had been written off or were sitting in somebody's kitchen, and whether — this went on for some time — the previous locum's handwriting was a 3 or an 8.

I have had a certain amount of experience of rooms in which something is about to happen. I know the physics of it. I could feel every bit of it, and so could she, and the two of us stood one metre apart in the dark and had the single most technical conversation of my adult life at a volume that was slightly too low for the subject matter.

At one point she said "give me your hand" and I gave her my hand and she put a box in it.

At the end of eleven minutes she said, "It's a 3," and I said, "It's an 8," and she put her shoulder against the door and it opened immediately.

She went out and put the kettle on the ring and neither of us referred to any of it, then or afterwards, ever, in any way.

And that night I wrote in the file: *Door in dispensary needs planing. Ask about the generator — second failure this month. Possible fuel or the starter.*

It was the starter.

PART THREE — THE WATER

Notes Eighteen to Twenty-Six

18.

Shares in time, unadjudicated since 1962.

The water of Ab-Bidar is owned in hours.

Not in land, not in volume, not in shares of a company. In *time*. A household owns a number of hours of the flow, in a cycle that comes round every twelve days, and the hours are inherited and divided and sold and mortgaged, and a man may own two hours and forty minutes on the ninth night of the cycle, which is a thing his great-grandfather bought, and which his four sons will one day own forty minutes of each.

There is a man whose job for six hundred years has been to stand at the division and watch a clock.

The clock used to be a bowl with a hole in it, floating in a basin. It sank at a fixed rate and when it went under, the water turned. I have held one. It is a brass bowl the size of a soup plate with a pinhole in the bottom and a set of scratches inside it, and the man who showed it to me kept it wrapped in a cloth in a tin, and it has not been used since 1971 because somebody's cousin brought a wristwatch back from Kuwait.

Now. The reason I am telling you about the bowl.

The last time anybody adjudicated the shares of Ab-Bidar properly was 1341 — 1962 — under a system that no longer exists, administered by an office that no longer exists, recorded in a register that was in a building that burned in the seventies.

Since then: sixty years of inheritance, division, sale, and one enormous unspoken problem.

The flow has dropped by more than half.

That is the thing. If you own two hours and forty minutes of a flow, and the flow halves, you now own two hours and forty minutes of half. Nobody's *hours* have changed. Everybody's *water* has. And there is no mechanism anywhere in the system for saying so, because the system counts time and time has not moved.

So for sixty years, in a village of four hundred people, everybody has been formally receiving exactly what they are owed and

actually receiving progressively less, and there is nobody to complain to, and no document that is wrong, and no thief.

I have never encountered a more perfect machine for producing rage.

The reason the flow has halved is not mysterious and everybody knows it and it is discussed in the way you discuss the weather in a country where the weather is somebody's fault. There are deep wells now. There is a pistachio operation eleven kilometres up the plain with a licence and a pump that goes to a hundred and eighty metres, and a qanat is a gravity device that skims the top of the water table, and if you lower the table the qanat goes dry from the top down while the pump keeps going.

The pump is legal. The licence is real. Somebody's brother-in-law signed it.

Yadollah said one sentence about this in fourteen weeks and it is the only bitter thing I ever heard him say: *"They are drinking it standing up."*

19.

Which of you last went down?

By the eleventh week two families were at the point where a thing gets said that cannot be unsaid.

The Ghaffari brothers own eleven hours between them across two nights. The Zomorrodīs own six and a half and are downstream at the division. Somebody had adjusted a stone. Everybody agreed a stone had been adjusted and nobody agreed when, or by whom, or whether the adjustment corrected a previous adjustment.

The nephew had said something in the shop about the Zomorrodīs' grandfather. It was not about water. Nothing that gets said at that stage is ever about water.

Nasrin told me not to get involved, in exactly those words, on a Tuesday.

I got involved on the Wednesday.

I want to be honest about why. It was not peace. I had been in that village eleven weeks and I was, for the first time since a hospital corridor in Mashhad, *bored*, and boredom in a man like me is the single most dangerous condition available.

I did the method.

Fifty minutes with the older Ghaffari in the consulting room with the door shut. I said perhaps nine words. He cried at one point, about his father, which had nothing to do with the stone.

Fifty minutes with Zomorodi the following morning. Both of them counted. Everybody always counts.

Then Thursday evening, both of them, in the waiting room, with the benches turned round, and eleven other men who had come because eleven other men always come.

I poured tea very slowly. This takes longer than you would think and does more than anything I could have said.

And then I asked the question.

In the salt town the question had been *which of you built it*. Here I asked:

"Which of you last went down?"

There was a silence of a particular quality that I have now heard three times in my life and would recognise in the dark.

Because the answer was neither of them. The answer was that no Ghaffari had been down that tunnel since 1979 and no Zomorodi ever, and that the water they were preparing to destroy two families over had been kept alive, personally, by hand, in the dark, ninety feet down, by one man, four hundred and some times, for fifty-eight years — and that the man was sitting on the end of the third bench with his cap in his hands because he had come to have his knee looked at and had got caught up in it.

I did not plan that. I want to be completely clear. I asked the question because it was the shape of question that works, and I did not know Yadollah was in the room.

Old Ghaffari turned round in his seat. And he said — and he was seventy-one himself and had known this man since they were both boys — “Yadollah jan. How is it down there?”

Nobody had ever asked him.

Fifty-eight years, and four hundred descents, and a village of four hundred people who all drank it, and not one of them had ever asked him what it was like down there.

He talked for forty minutes. About the roof at the eleventh shaft that he has been watching since 1996. About the section where the tunnel goes through a seam of something soft and every man in his family has known you go through it fast and quiet. About his father’s lamp. About the four hundred and eleven descents and how he knows the number the way you know your own telephone number.

Nobody interrupted. Somebody brought more tea.

At the end of it the two families agreed to put the stone where Yadollah said it should be, and it was not a compromise, and nobody had negotiated anything, and it held.

I walked back to the clinic that night feeling extremely good about myself, and I want that on the record too, because it is the last time in this book I feel good about anything.

Nasrin was on the step.

She said, “That was the best thing anyone has done in this village in eleven months.” A pause. “You have no idea what you’ve just done, do you.”

I said I had settled a water dispute.

She said, “You have become the man they come to.”

20.

The number he knows.

Four hundred and eleven descents.

She has signed four hundred and eleven times.

I noticed it on the walk back and I have never once been able to decide whether it means anything. I have turned it over for twenty years. Two people in one village, each keeping a private count of the number of times they went down into something on behalf of people who did not ask them to.

The rational position is that it is nothing. Numbers repeat. A man who has done a thing weekly for fifty-eight years and a woman who has signed a form daily for eleven months will arrive at similar totals, and if I had gone looking I could have found four hundred and eleven of something in that village every week.

I did not go looking. That is the part that stops me sleeping. It arrived.

I have had two experiences of a number arriving like that, and the other one was a name in a fourth column, and I am going to tell you about the second one shortly and you will see why I cannot leave this alone.

21.

They were not attending them. They were writing them down.

It came out sideways, over the stone, three days later.

Yadollah was explaining why the 1341 adjudication was worthless, and he said that nobody had come out to the villages properly since, except the boys.

I said, which boys.

And he said, in the tone of a man mentioning a weather event from his adolescence, that in the year of the revolution the seminaries sent the students out into the villages. Not to preach. They came with notebooks. They sat in people's houses for three or four days, sometimes a week, and they asked people what they wanted.

I said: what they wanted from the government?

He said no.

They asked people what they wanted from God.

And then he said the thing that I have carried for twenty years:

"It was a foolish thing to ask. You ask a man what he wants from the government and he will tell you a lie he has prepared. You ask him what he wants from God and he will tell you the truth, because he has never been asked before and he does not know it is dangerous."

A young one came to Ab-Bidar. Yadollah was sixteen. He remembers a thin boy with a bad chest and a good pen who stayed five days and wrote in a notebook with a hard cover.

He remembers what he told him.

He would not tell me what it was, then or ever, and I asked twice, and the second time he looked at me in a way that ended it permanently.

Now. Sit with what this does.

My mother went to a shrine in the autumn of 1357 and stayed forty nights and never mentioned it to a living soul for the rest of her life. And in the fourth column of that shrine's pilgrim register, beside her name, in the trustee's father's hand, there is a name.

I had spent ten weeks and four hundred thousand tomans on one assumption: that the name was the man who *attended* her.

But the boys who went out in 1357 were not attending anybody.

They were *recording*.

Which means that whatever is written beside Parvaneh Fani is not a note about her care. It is an entry made because somebody instructed that it be made. Somebody designed a form with a fourth column in it. Somebody collected the notebooks afterwards.

And somebody kept them.

My mother was asked what she wanted from God, in the autumn of 1357, in a stone room in a salt town, and she told the truth, because she had never been asked before and did not know it was dangerous — and eight months later I was born, and she burned esfand [es-FAND] over my head at every threshold of my life for thirty years and never said one word about any of it.

I sat in a clinic and did the returns and got two of them wrong.

22.

A hole in the ground is the only thing I was never afraid of.

The roof at the eleventh shaft came down in the second week of Azar.

Not the whole tunnel. A fall of maybe two metres of the soft seam, enough to choke the flow to a quarter and enough that if it was not cleared before the winter the whole thing would go, and if the whole thing went then Ab-Bidar would have to be on tankers within a year and on tankers there is no village, because tankers cost money and the young leave first.

Yadollah was seventy-four and it was his tunnel.

He had two nephews. One is in Mashhad and did not answer. The other came, looked down the shaft, and said, honestly and without shame, that he could not do it, and I have never held that against him for a second.

So it was going to be Yadollah on his own, at seventy-four, with a knee that needed an operation he was never going to have.

I said I would go down with him.

I want to give you my actual reasons, in the order of size.

The smallest and most respectable was the village. It was real and it was about eleventh on the list.

Above that: that I liked him, and that he had spent fifty-eight years doing a thing nobody asked him about, and that I had watched a room full of men finally ask him and I wanted to be in the room where that continued.

Above that: that I am the only man in any village I have ever been in who is not afraid of a hole in the ground, and I have known this about myself since I was seventeen, and I have never once had a legitimate use for it, and I wanted one.

And at the top of the list, which I did not admit to myself until about a year later: *Nasrin was going to be at the top of that shaft.*

That is it. That is the reason. A man of forty-six went ninety feet into an eight-hundred-year-old tunnel in bad air because a woman

he had not worked out he was in love with was going to be holding the other end of the rope, and because he wanted, one time, to be looked at by somebody while doing something that was not a lie.

He said, "You'll do as you're told down there."

I said I would.

He said, "You won't. Nobody does the first time. That is why I said it."

23.

Ninety feet is nothing. It is the last four that are the problem.

The shaft is a hole in the ground about a metre across with a ring of spoil round the lip, and there are two hundred of them going off across that plain in a line, and from a distance it looks like the burrow of something enormous.

You go down on a rope with a foot loop, hand over hand, past eight hundred years of pick marks. The marks change every few metres because the men changed. You can see where somebody got tired in about 1350.

At forty feet you lose the sky as a thing that means anything and it becomes a coin.

At seventy feet it gets warm.

Yadollah went first because Yadollah always goes first, and at the bottom he lit a candle and set it on a ledge cut for exactly that purpose, cut by someone, for a candle, eight hundred years ago, and he watched it for a while, and then he said, "It's all right today."

That is the entire safety apparatus of a profession that has existed since before Islam. A candle on a ledge. The bad air is heavier than the good air and it pools in the low places and it puts a flame out before it puts a man out, and if the flame goes small you go up.

I asked him what happens if it goes out.

He said, "You are already going up."

The tunnel at the bottom is not a room. It is a slot about seventy centimetres wide and a metre and a half high with water running along the floor, and it goes off into the dark in both directions with no end that a lamp can find, and it goes on like that for eleven kilometres.

I want to say something about what it does to a person and I am going to fail.

I have been in a great many places I was not supposed to be. I have stood in a stranger's hallway at two in the morning listening to him breathe on the other side of a door. That is a particular flavour of fear and I understand it completely.

This was not fear. Standing at the bottom of a qanat is the most profoundly *accompanied* I have ever felt. There is water moving past your boots that has been moving past boots since the Mongols, and every centimetre of the roof over your head was cut by a man on his back with a short pick, by hand, in the dark, with a lamp, for money, and he is dead, and so is his son who cleared it after him, and so is everybody who ever drank it.

And Yadollah walks down there the way you walk down your own street.

We worked for about an hour on the fall. It was mud and gravel and a slab of the soft seam, and the technique is to take it down in pieces and let the water carry the fines away, and it is unbelievably boring and extremely wet and my hands were ruined inside twenty minutes.

Then he said we would go and look at the next section, and we went about two hundred metres up the tunnel, which is a thing I would not have agreed to if I had understood it, because two hundred metres in there is not two hundred metres.

And somewhere in that section the candle we were carrying went small.

24.

The handover.

I want to put down first what is actually true, because I owe you that before I put down the other thing.

Carbon dioxide pools in the low sections of a qanat. It is heavier than air. It has no smell. It kills muqanni [mo-ghan-NEE] in this country every single year, and it kills them in a particular way that everybody in the trade knows about and nobody outside it does, which is that *it does not frighten you*.

It makes you warm. It makes you slow. It makes you pleased. And it removes, completely and cleanly, the faculty by which you would notice that anything was happening. The man losing his mind is the last to know, and he is often the last to know in a good mood.

I know all of this now. I did not know any of it then.

What I remember is this.

The candle went small and Yadollah said something and started back and I said I would follow him, and I meant to, and I did not, and I have no memory of deciding not to.

I sat down in six inches of water in a tunnel eight hundred years old and I was extremely comfortable.

Then there was a man there.

Not a light. Not a figure. I have gone at this for twenty years and the only honest description I have is that *the tunnel had a colleague in it*, in the way that an office has a colleague in it when you have your back to the room.

And he was irritated.

That is the part nobody believes and it is the part I am most sure of. There was no awe in it, none, not a gram. There was a man doing a handover on a Thursday afternoon who would rather be leaving, and who had been told to brief his replacement, and who was going to do it properly because he was that sort of man, and who was not enjoying it.

He said — and I am not going to pretend these were words in the air, they arrived the way your own telephone number arrives —

You've not been oiling those.

I said, out loud, in a tunnel, sitting in water: "What?"

The shoes. They take oil badly. You have to do it twice and leave it overnight. Nobody tells anybody anything.

I said, "They're not mine."

I'm aware.

And I laughed. I want that recorded. I sat ninety feet under a desert in bad air and laughed at something, and the something was not funny, and I have never been able to explain to anybody why that was the moment I stopped being frightened.

Then he went through it. Briskly. The way you go through a list when you have somewhere to be.

Did anybody ever ask you what you wanted?

I said nobody had.

No. They stopped doing that. A pause of exactly the length a man leaves when he is deciding how much of something to say. I wrote down four hundred of them. I only kept one.

I said, "One what?"

And he said the third thing, and he said it the way you correct a colleague who has filled in a form wrong — mildly, without emphasis, slightly bored, as a point of procedure:

The fourth column is not for names.

Then Yadollah had me by the collar.

25.

He says I was talking for twenty minutes, and answering.

He got me up the tunnel by the collar and the belt, seventy-four years old, on a knee that needed an operation he was never going to have, and he tied me into the loop at the bottom of the shaft and went up himself and hauled, and I was no help whatsoever.

I was sick twice at the top. Then I was euphoric for about two hours, which is the thing nobody warns you about — the *good mood* on the surface afterwards, entirely chemical, during which I apparently talked a great deal and made several jokes that Yadollah did not repeat to me.

Then, at about eight in the evening, I got very cold and stayed cold until the next afternoon.

Nasrin gave me sugar water and did not ask me anything at all and did not leave the room for four hours, and I noted that she seemed concerned about the fluid situation.

Yadollah came up the next day and stood in the doorway and would not sit.

He said, "How is the head."

I said it was fine.

He said, "You were talking down there."

I said I knew.

He said, "Twenty minutes." He turned his cap over in his hands. "And answering. There is a difference. Men sing down there. Men shout at their fathers. I have heard a lot of it in fifty-eight years and I know what it sounds like."

I said, "And?"

And he said, "You were *listening*. In the gaps. You were waiting for him to finish."

I have had that sentence in me ever since.

Then he said one more thing, and he said it from the doorway, on his way out, and he did not turn round:

"My father did the same at your age. He would not say who to." He put his cap on. "I did not ask him either. We are not a family that asks."

Now, I want to be extremely careful here, because you will be tempted and I was tempted and I am not going to let either of us have it.

There was nothing down there. I had bad air in my blood. Bad air produces exactly this: euphoria, time distortion, conversation, no insight, and a total conviction of company. It is documented. It kills men who feel wonderful. My brain, starved and pleased, assembled a colleague out of a lifetime of colleagues and gave him something to say.

That is the correct explanation and I hold it and I have never abandoned it.

It has one hole in it, and the hole is not the shoes and it is not the four hundred.

The fourth column is not for names.

I have spent ten weeks and every toman I had on the assumption that the name in that column was a man. Every road I took west, I took because of that assumption. And a thing my own oxygen-starved brain invented in a tunnel told me — flatly, as a correction on a form, in the tone of a man who fills in forms — that my central assumption about a document I had seen with my own eyes was *wrong in category*.

A hallucination cannot correct you.

A hallucination can only give you back what you already had. And I did not have that. I had never thought it. I had never once, in ten weeks, considered that the thing beside my mother's name might not be a person.

I have taken this to two educated men over the years. Both of them told me, kindly, that the mind knows a great deal it has not admitted to knowing, and that I had probably seen something in that register with my own eyes that had not yet reached the front, and that the tunnel simply gave it a voice and a bad mood.

That is probably right.

I would like it very much if it were right.

And I cannot check, because the register is in Shurabad, and Shurabad is the one place on the surface of this earth where I can never go again.

26.

I bought oil for a dead man's shoes.

Four days later I went to the shop at the top of the village, which is also the bus stop and also where the mail goes, and I bought a tin of leather oil for eleven thousand tomans, which was two days of my food.

I did them twice and left them overnight, which is what you do, because they take oil badly.

I want you to understand that I did not decide to do this. I did not stand somewhere and weigh it up. I went and bought oil in the way a man buys bread.

The shoes came off a chair in a hospital in Mashhad and they are half a size too big and they have ruined both my feet and I have now had them longer than I have had any relationship in my adult life.

The man in the shop asked whether they were new.

I said they were my father's.

I have no idea why I said that. My father was a locksmith with feet like paddles and he was buried in his own shoes in 2011. It came out of me across a counter with no thought in front of it, and the shopkeeper said God have mercy on him, and I said thank you, and I took the oil and left.

That is the second time.

The first was a stone room full of smoke where something used my prison name and told me I had been brought back and that she had stood where I was sitting, and I filed it under grief, and the filing was good and I stand by it.

This one I filed under the first one.

Two files, and both of them the same drawer, and the drawer is the one I do not open, and I have now been carrying it long enough that it has stopped being a drawer and started being a piece of furniture.

PART FOUR — THE WEEK

Notes Twenty-Seven to Thirty-Four

27.

She worked it out in week nine and said nothing for five.

I have the date because she told me the date, later, in the way she told me everything: flatly, at the wrong moment, while doing something else.

Week nine. A Tuesday. A man came in with a chest and I listened to it with the stethoscope for the correct length of time and moved it to the correct four places and looked at the middle distance, and afterwards she asked me what I had heard.

I said it was clear.

She said, "Which side."

And I said the left, because there are two and one of them is left.

It was the right. He had been in a wall collapse in 1401 and there is nothing on the right; it is a flat quiet field, and everyone who has ever put a stethoscope on that man has remarked on it, and I had listened to it for eleven seconds and told her it was clear.

She did not react in any visible way. She wrote something down. She gave the man his tablets and told him to come back Sunday.

Then she went on working with me for five weeks and said absolutely nothing.

I want to walk through what she did with those five weeks, because I only reconstructed it afterwards and it is, I think, the most competent piece of work anybody has done in my presence.

She tested me. Not once — continuously, at low volume, in a way I never noticed. She asked me things a doctor would know and watched me route around them. She left a drug chart where I would see it and watched me not read it. She said a word to me that does not exist, in a clinical sentence, and I agreed with her.

Then she went and looked at the identity card again, which she had been given on the first evening and had read all the way to the numbers.

And then — and this is the part I would not have had the nerve for — she did nothing.

Because she ran the sum. She ran the same sum the whole village had run about Behnam and got the same answer, and I want to set it out the way she set it out to me eventually, because it is not a nice sum and she did not present it as one.

Report him, and there is no locum, and the seventh will not come either.

Report him, and there is an inspection, and an inspection finds Behnam.

Report him, and the clinic shuts, and the nearest is a hundred and forty kilometres.

Keep him, and there is a man in the building who can hold a room, settle a family, sit with a frightened girl for fifty minutes, and be looked at by four hundred people as somebody in charge — none of which requires medicine, and all of which she has been doing alone on top of the medicine for eleven months.

“You were,” she told me later, “the best available option, and I want you to understand how bad that sentence is.”

The one thing she never did, in fourteen weeks, was let me touch a decision. Not once. Every drug, every dose, every referral, every dressing came out of her and passed through my mouth. She built a machine in which the fraud could only ever do the part that could not kill anybody, and she ran it for five weeks before she told me she knew.

And then in the tenth week she stopped running it for six days, and a boy died, and she has never once said that out loud and neither have I.

28.

The arithmetic neither of us admitted to.

Two rooms. Four hundred people. A woman whose entire professional standing in that province rests on a reputation that would not survive one sentence in one shop. A man who is legally somebody else and has no papers in his own name and cannot be a witness to anything, including his own life.

We both ran the numbers constantly. Neither of us ever said one word about it.

Here is the shape of it, and every unmarried adult in every village in this country will recognise every line.

There is no door in Ab-Bidar that closes on two people without four hundred people knowing which door and for how long. There is a woman in the third house who is at her window. There is a boy who takes the goats past at half past five. The generator noise tells you which building is occupied. A light on in the clinic after ten is a fact that is discussed at breakfast, and I heard it discussed, and the discussion was entirely benign and entirely accurate and that is precisely the problem.

And there is the other arithmetic, which is worse, which is: what exactly would either of us be starting.

I was leaving. That was not a plan I was concealing from her — it was the *premise*. It was the thing that made the whole arrangement possible. The reason she could work beside a man she knew to be a fraud was that he was temporary, and the reason he could be relied on to hold a room was that he was going, and the reason she had put the weight down at all was that there was nothing to be careful with.

So the honest version of the sum was: *anything that happens here makes me a person who leaves you.*

I did not have that thought in those words at the time. I want to be clear about that. At the time I had the thought in the form in which I have had every important thought of my life, which is a low-grade physical restlessness and a series of notes about supply.

And she had it in words, the whole time, from about week six, because she is a serious person and I am not.

29.

Brief, warm, and afterwards we discussed the generator.

It happened on a Wednesday in the twelfth week, in the dispensary, with the door open.

The door being open is the only detail that matters and it is the one I want on the record. There was no seduction and there was no decision. There was a woman putting a box on a high shelf and a man reaching past her to take it because he was taller, and a moment in which neither of them moved out of the way, which lasted about four seconds, and then the whole of it.

It was brief. I am forty-six and I have been in prison for four years and she had not been touched by anybody since her husband's family stopped speaking to her in 1398, and both of those facts were in the room and neither of them was a tragedy and both of them were, at one point, extremely funny.

She laughed at me twice. Once at something I said and once at something I did, and the second one was fair.

I want to say something about the difference between this and the thirty-odd other arrangements of my adult life, because it is the only useful observation I have.

My method was attention. I have told you this. I would be, for six to eleven weeks, an extraordinarily good man — present, accurate, on time, noticing — and then the lamp would go off.

I did not do any of that here. Not one part of it. I had not remembered the name of her sister; I did not know she had a sister. I had spent twelve weeks writing notes about tea supply. I had been, by my own professional standards, appalling.

And it was the only time in my life it was not a performance, and I could not tell you which of those two facts caused the other.

Afterwards we sat on the floor of a dispensary the size of a wardrobe and discussed the generator for about twenty minutes. Genuinely. The starter, whether the man in Sabzevar could be trusted, whether it was worth taking the whole unit in on the pickup. She had a very strong position on the starter.

That is the happiest twenty minutes I have ever spent and I would like it noted that nothing whatsoever was happening in it.

Then she said, "I am going to take a week."

30.

The only person in eleven months who did not need her to be good at anything.

I am going to write this note from the wrong side, because it is the only way it can be written and because I did not earn the information; I was given it, four years later, in a letter, and I will not be reproducing the letter.

She did not fall in love with me because I was kind. I was not particularly kind. I was funny at her and I listened, and she had been listened to before by better men.

She did it because I was the first person in eleven months who did not need her to be *competent*.

Consider what she was to everybody else in that village.

To Behnam she was the person holding him up. Every conversation with him carried the whole weight of the arrangement — she had to be sharp, she had to be watching, she had to know what he had eaten and whether today was a good one and whether he could be let out into the corridor.

To four hundred people she was the one who knows. You do not get to be tired in front of a person who has walked eleven kilometres because their child is hot. You do not get to be uncertain. She had been the only competent adult in a building for eleven months and there is no clocking off from that; it follows you to the shop.

To the province she was a set of returns that had to be correct.

And I needed her for exactly nothing.

I had no chart she had to check. I could not be helped and I could not be advised and I did not require managing. I was a man who had walked in off a bus and would walk back out onto it, and the entire content of my requirements was that somebody occasionally tell me what a word meant.

She could be wrong in front of me. That is the whole of it. There was one person in the province of whom that was true and he was a burglar in a dead man's shoes, and for about a fortnight she could say *I don't know* out loud in a room, and nobody died, and nothing fell over.

I have thought about this more than I have thought about the tunnel.

Because a man who needs nothing from you is not a good man. It is not generosity and it is not restraint. I needed nothing from her because I was *leaving*, and the lightness she felt in that building was the exact weight of my absence in advance.

She rested on a thing that was not there.

31.

She took the week.

She took it from the Saturday.

She told the shop, so the village would know, which was the correct procedure and which she had never once done in eleven months. She told Behnam, on a good morning, and he said "about time" and meant it and then asked about the car for the woman from the upper village.

She gave me a list. Six pages. It is the most thorough document I have ever been handed and I have handled a great many documents. What is in the cupboard and where. Which four families come every week and what for. What to do if the generator will not start and what to do if it will not start twice. The number for the car. The number for the other car. The number for the hospital at Sabzevar and the name of the woman on the desk who answers at night and the name of her son, so that I could ask after him, because that is how a hundred and forty kilometres gets arranged in this country at two in the morning.

And on the last page, underlined twice: *Anything you are not sure about, it goes in the car. You are not deciding. You are transporting.*

She had built me a machine that could not kill anybody.

Then she went four hundred metres up the road to her aunt's house and slept for two days.

I saw her on the Monday, in the afternoon, on the step. She had a mark on her cheek from a cushion and her hair was wrong and she looked eleven years younger and faintly stupid, which I have never seen on her before or since.

She said, "I have been asleep since Saturday."

I said, "How is it?"

And she said, "I have no idea what I am like. I am going to go back and find out."

I laughed.

She laughed too, this time.

And she went back up the road and turned her phone off, because it had been on for eleven months, and she was four hundred metres away, and a boy was brought into that clinic on the Wednesday night at twenty past eleven.

32.

His name was Hadi. He was nine.

They came at twenty past eleven on the Wednesday, the father and an uncle, in a pickup, from the upper village. The boy had been vomiting since the afternoon and had a pain in his stomach and had gone quiet in the last hour, and quiet was why they came.

I put him on the couch. He was hot and his belly was hard and he did not want to be touched anywhere on the right side, and when I moved my hand there he took hold of my wrist with both of his and held it away from himself and did not make a sound.

I looked at the list.

The list said: anything you are not sure about goes in the car. You are not deciding. You are transporting.

I was going to put him in the car. I want that written down. I had the paper in my hand and I had the number for the hospital at

Sabzevar and I knew the name of the woman on the desk and the name of her son.

And the father said the road at the ford had gone in the rain on Monday, and the way round was two and a half hours, and could he not have something for the pain and go in the morning when it was light and the boy had slept.

And the uncle said the boy had done this before, in the spring, and it had passed.

And the boy's temperature came down while they were saying it, which happens, which I did not know happens, which is the single most dangerous thing that can occur in that room and there is nobody in the country who does that work who does not know it.

I gave him something for the pain. I wrote *for review a.m.* on the card and I put the card in the tray.

He looked better within twenty minutes. He said he was thirsty. He asked me if I had a phone with games on it, and I said no, and he said that was a shame, and his father laughed at him, and they took him home at half past midnight and I stood in the doorway and watched the pickup go up the road.

They came back at ten past six with the boy grey in the father's arms.

He died in the car at the ford, about four kilometres out, at some time after seven. I was not with him. They did not come back to the clinic. There was no reason to come back to the clinic.

Nasrin heard the vehicles from her aunt's house at six and came down the road with her coat over her nightclothes and got there as they were leaving.

She read the card in the tray.

She did not say anything to me. She has never said anything to me about it, from that morning to this. She read the card and put it back in the tray and went and got in the second car and went with the father, and she was gone all day, and she came back that night and washed the floor of the consulting room, which did not need washing.

There is a form for a death in a rural post. It has to be signed by a physician. There was no physician in Ab-Bidar and had not been one for eleven months and nine days.

I signed it.

I have signed a great many things that were not mine to sign. That one I could not get my hand to do for a long time, and then I did it, and my hand was steady, and I have never forgiven my hand for that.

33.

The jokes came back two pages later, which is worse.

Here is a thing nobody tells you about grief in a working building.

It does not stop the building.

There were nine people in the waiting room on the Friday. There was a woman with an ear. There was a man who wanted to discuss, at length, whether the tablets he had been given in Sabzevar in 1399 were the same as the tablets he had now, and he had brought both boxes, and he wanted a ruling.

And I was funny at him. Within forty-eight hours. I heard myself doing it — the timing, the pause, the little turn at the end — and I watched him laugh, and I watched myself be pleased that he laughed, and I want you to understand that I did not decide to do any of that and could not have stopped it with a hand.

It is not resilience. It is not courage and it is certainly not healing. It is that the machinery is fitted and it runs on its own current and a man who has made jokes under pressure since he was nine years old will make one over a body if you leave him in the room long enough.

That is what I am. I have looked at it from every side and there is nothing behind it.

Nasrin came back to work on the Saturday. She had taken two days of her week.

We worked beside each other for the remaining fortnight and here is what was said about it: nothing.

I do not mean we avoided it delicately. I mean there was no sentence available. Consider what either of us would have had to say.

If I say *I should have put him in the car* — which is true, and which is the whole of it — then I am asking her to say something, and there are only two things she can say, and one is a lie and the other is *yes*.

If she says *I should not have turned the phone off*, then she has said out loud that a woman who worked eleven months without a night off killed a child by sleeping, and I would have to argue with it, and I would be arguing on behalf of a version of events in which the fraud is not to blame.

And underneath both of those is the sentence that neither of us could go anywhere near, which is that the reason she was asleep four hundred metres away with her phone off, for the first time in eleven months, is that she had been happy that week, and the reason she had been happy is me.

Love did that. Not passion, not sacrifice, not any of the things it is supposed to cost you. *Rest*. She put the weight down for six days and a boy walked in under it.

And the person it landed on was nine and had never heard of any of us and would have liked to have played a game on a telephone.

So we did the stock. We did the returns. She corrected me twice a day and I was funny at patients and she started leaving one glass of tea instead of two, and I noticed that, and wrote nothing down about it.

34.

The good one cannot be told either.

I want to put the other one here, in the same part, deliberately, because if I put it anywhere else it looks like consolation and it is not consolation.

In the seventh week — five weeks before the boy — a woman came in from the lower houses at about eleven at night with a headache.

Just a headache. She had walked. Her sister was with her.

I knew something was wrong with her inside about four seconds and I could not have told you one clinical reason why. She was forty-something. She was talking normally. She said the word *headache* and then she put her hand on the door frame, and it was the way she put her hand on the door frame — the exactness of it, a woman placing her hand where she had decided to place it — and I had seen that once before in a stairwell in Karaj [ka-RAJ] in 2004, on a man who had a stroke twenty minutes later, and I have never forgotten what it looks like when somebody starts arranging themselves.

Nasrin was there. I said, in front of her, “That goes in the car.”

She said the guideline is observe and refer at first light, and she was correct, and she said it because she is a professional and because the car costs money and the road at night is what it is and the family had four hundred thousand tomans in the world.

I said, “It goes in the car.”

And she looked at me for about a second and a half, and then she went and got the car.

I filled in the transfer authorisation myself, at the desk, at eleven at night, with a number on it that belonged to a man off a bus luggage rack, and I put on it a description of what I had seen, which was not a clinical description because I do not have one, and what I wrote was: *arranging herself. Not right. Send.*

They took her a hundred and forty kilometres and she was in a theatre in Sabzevar before four in the morning with a bleed in her head, and she lived, and she is alive now, and she has grandchildren.

At first light she would have been dead.

And here is what that transfer form did.

It went to Sabzevar, and Sabzevar is a real hospital with a real records department, and a transfer that arrives at three in the morning and turns out to be *correct* is a transfer that gets remembered. Somebody in that department looked at the form

afterwards — because it had been right, because nobody expects a rural post to be right at three in the morning — and looked at the number on it, and the number was not the number that had been signing everything out of Ab-Bidar for eleven years.

Nothing happened for four months.

And then a letter came from the province asking the health post at Ab-Bidar to submit its complete register of consultations and disposals for the preceding eleven months, together with the practising certificate of the signing physician.

The fraud was exposed because it worked.

That is the sentence. I have had twenty years and I cannot improve it. Eleven months of a nurse forging a broken man's signature went entirely unnoticed by the entire apparatus of the state, because eleven months of it was *unremarkable*. The system was not looking for wrongdoing. The system does not look for anything. It notices deviation, and the only genuine deviation in eleven months of that clinic was a decision that saved a woman's life.

If I had been a real doctor I would have observed and referred at first light, correctly, by the guideline, and she would have died, and the paperwork would have been perfect, and no one would ever have looked at Ab-Bidar again.

I want to be careful not to make myself the hero of this. I did not know what was wrong with her. I could not have named it if you had held a gun to me. What I did was recognise, from a stairwell in Karaj in 2004, the face of a person beginning to put themselves in order — and that is not medicine, that is twenty-seven years of watching people in rooms, and it is the same skill I used to know which flat was empty.

The good I did and the crime I am are the same instrument. I cannot separate them. I have stopped trying.

She lived. Her family have never known my name, and the name they do have belongs to a man in some other province who has never heard of any of them, and if he is alive he is presumably still wondering what happened to his bag.

And a boy died five weeks later in the back of a pickup at the ford because I was frightened of a two-and-a-half-hour road, and his family know exactly who I am, and the name they have is the same wrong one.

PART FIVE — THE RECORD

Notes Thirty-Five to Forty

35.

A stamp is more real than a fact.

The letter from the province arrived on a Tuesday in a brown envelope with a window in it and sat on the desk for four hours before anybody opened it, because everybody in that building knew what a brown envelope with a window is.

It asked for three things. The complete register of consultations and disposals for eleven months. The practising certificate of the signing physician. And a date, in Dey, on which an officer would attend.

Nasrin read it twice and put it down and said, "Well."

And then she did something I did not expect, which was to laugh — one syllable, out of the nose, entirely without pleasure — and say, "Eleven months. Four hundred and eleven signatures. Three hundred and something referrals. And they have written to me because a woman did not die."

I want to say what I understood in that room, because it is the only thing I know that is worth anything and it took me forty-six years and four professions to arrive at it.

The state of this country is not looking for the truth. It has never been looking for the truth. It is looking for a document that is consistent with itself.

I know this the way a plumber knows about water. I have spent my adult life going in and out of a system that is supposed to catch me, and it has caught me once, and it caught me because an eighty-four-year-old woman fell over, not because of anything anybody wrote down.

Consider what had actually gone unnoticed. A doctor with an eleven-year record had stopped practising and nobody in any office anywhere had registered it, because the returns kept coming and the returns were correct. A nurse had signed a physician's name four hundred and eleven times and no human being had ever compared two of those signatures, because there was no reason to and no mechanism for it and nobody whose job it was. A burglar

had walked into a health post off a bus and practised medicine for fourteen weeks on a laminated card he found in a bag, and the province had sent him three circulars, a vaccination schedule and a form about hepatitis.

None of that produced a letter.

What produced a letter was a form that was *right*, at three in the morning, in a place where nobody expects right.

That is not corruption. I want to be careful, because it would be much more comfortable if it were corruption. Nobody in that provincial office was crooked. They were doing exactly the job as described: matching numbers to numbers. A system that matches numbers to numbers will catch every inconsistency and no lies whatsoever, and it is the same in every ministry in every country and ours has simply had longer to perfect it.

I had spent my whole life on the wrong side of the paperwork, going through windows.

It took me until that Tuesday to notice that the window had never been the way in.

36.

Eleven months in one night.

I did it on the Thursday, alone, from eight in the evening to about five in the morning, with the generator going and the door locked.

Nasrin knew I was going to do it and did not stay. That was not cowardice. That was her being extremely intelligent, because a person who was not in the room can say she was not in the room and that is the only asset either of us had left.

Here is what I did, and I am going to set it out properly, because it is the most skilled work of my life and it is a crime and both of those are true.

The register had eleven months of entries in one hand — hers. Four hundred and eleven signatures in a second hand, forged — also hers, and honestly not very well; she is a nurse, not a burglar, and a forgery made four hundred times by a tired woman at the end of a

shift drifts, and hers had drifted about two millimetres to the right over eleven months in a way that any competent examiner would find in an afternoon.

I could not undo that. Nobody could undo that.

So I did the other thing.

I did not remove the forgery. *I explained it.*

I wrote a new document. Twenty-two pages, in my own hand, dated across eleven months in eleven different inks, using four pens I had been buying one at a time in Sabzevar for three weeks. It was a supervision log — the kind of thing a supervising physician keeps on a nurse practising under delegated authority in a remote post, which is a real category, which exists in the regulations, which Behnam had a copy of on the shelf in the back room and which I got Nasrin to read to me twice without telling her why.

In the new document, Dr Behnam Ardalani was unwell from Farvardin. He was under treatment. He remained in the post, in residence, exercising clinical oversight, and had — with a written delegation, which I also wrote, and which took me two hours to get right — authorised his nurse to record and dispose under his authority, countersigning in batches, which accounts for the drift, because a man signing forty at a time signs the fortieth differently from the first.

Every decision she made became a decision he supervised.

Every signature she forged became a signature he delegated.

And every single thing that could not be made to fit either of those — nine referrals, two disposals, a controlled drug entry from Aban that I could not account for by any route — I moved onto myself.

Onto the locum. Onto the man on the laminated card. Onto a name off a bus luggage rack.

Which is the part I want to put down plainly.

I have wondered about him for twenty years. He was born eleven months before me. He was on a bus in Sabzevar in the autumn and he put a bag on a rack over row eleven and got off somewhere and

it was not there. He reported it or he did not. He got another card or he did not.

And in a file in a provincial health office there is now a locum who attended Ab-Bidar for fourteen weeks, made nine decisions of questionable judgement, and left without notice, and that file has his number on it.

I do not know what it cost him. It may have cost him nothing. It may have cost him a great deal.

I sat at that desk for nine hours and made a woman innocent and a sick man dignified and a stranger culpable, and I did it well, and at about four in the morning I understood that I had finally found the thing I was actually good at, and that it had taken until forty-six, and that there was no version of the world in which I could ever do it again for anybody who would know my name.

37.

What the boy's card said afterwards.

There is one entry in eleven months that I did not touch.

I had the card in front of me at about two in the morning. *For review a.m.* In my hand. In the tray where I put it.

I could have made it anything. That is the thing I need you to understand — by two in the morning I had been forging for six hours and the document was mine, entirely, and I could have written a transfer that was refused by the family, which happens, which is common, which nobody would ever have questioned because the family were four kilometres away burying him and would never in their lives read a health post register.

I could have made him a boy who was sent and did not go.

I sat with the card for a long time.

And then I put it back exactly as it was, and I wrote nothing, and it is in that register now, in my handwriting, saying *for review a.m.*, and if anybody ever looks at those twenty-two pages properly the only true line in the entire document is the one that convicts me.

I would like to tell you that this was conscience.

It was not conscience. I want to be accurate. I sat there and I thought about the father, who cannot read, and about the uncle, who can, and about the fact that a village of four hundred people already knows exactly what happened and does not need a document to know it — and I understood that changing that card would not deceive one single person who mattered. It would only deceive the province.

And I did not want to be a man who had lied to the province about that particular thing. Not because it would be wrong. Because it would be *cheap*.

Make of that what you like. I have.

38.

I did not say goodbye, because saying goodbye requires being somebody.

I left on the Sunday before the inspection, at about half past four in the morning, and I did not tell her I was going.

That is the worst thing in this book and I am including a dead child in that assessment, and I will explain why, and the explanation is not going to make it better.

The boy I could not have saved after a certain hour on a certain night, because I am not a doctor and never was. It is the worst thing that happened. It is not the worst thing I *did*.

The worst thing I did was walk up a road in the dark because I could not sit in a room and be looked at while somebody said goodbye to a man who does not exist.

She would have said something true. That is what I could not face. Fourteen weeks and she had earned the right to say something true to me at a door, and there was nobody standing there to receive it — the name was wrong, the card was wrong, the qualification was wrong, and the only accurate sentence available to me was *I am a thief called Nader Fani and I am wanted in three provinces*, and I was not going to say that to her because saying it would have made her a person who knew it.

So I left her the twenty-two pages, and a note about the generator starter, and a list of the nine things I had put on the locum so that she would know exactly which lies she was standing behind and could hold her nerve when the officer read them out.

That is what I gave a woman instead of a goodbye. An index.

I took the shoes, which were oiled now, twice, left overnight, and which were still half a size too big and always will be.

At the top of the village I stopped at the shop, which is also the bus stop and also where the mail goes, and the man on the pallets was not there because it was half past four in the morning, and I sat on the pallets and waited for the six o'clock and looked back down at four hundred people in the dark.

The generator was running.

39.

Three men.

I have been three men.

I was Nader Fani for forty-six years, which was not a success. I was a sayyid in a salt town for fourteen months. I was a doctor in Ab-Bidar for fourteen weeks.

The count is not a joke. I want you to notice that it is not a joke. I counted six hundred doors and I counted eighty apologies and I have never once been able to stop counting anything, and now I am counting men, and the number goes up and does not come down.

On the bus out I thought about the birds, because there was nothing else to think about for four hours.

Yadollah told it to me wrong. I know that now — I have since had it told to me properly by somebody who had read it, and there were seven valleys and not seven deserts, and there were far more birds than he remembered, and every one of them stood up and gave an excuse.

But he had the two that mattered, and I have thought about the wrong one for twenty years.

I thought the nightingale was a fool. I said so out loud in a clinic in front of a man who had gone down the same hole four hundred and eleven times, a woman who had not left a building in eleven months, and a doctor in a back room, and every one of them had stayed for a rose of one kind or another and I was the only person present who had not.

And Yadollah said the rose only lasts a week and the bird knows that and stays anyway.

I have got on eleven buses in my life at half past four in the morning.

Here is what I could not have understood at the time and can only just about hold now. The nightingale is not the sad one in that poem. The nightingale has something. He is standing in a garden, in front of everybody, saying *this, here, is worth more than the journey* — and he is wrong, and he knows he is wrong, and he stays.

The one who has nothing is the one who goes.

I have been three men and every one of them left, and I have started to suspect that I am not the traveller in this story. I think I might be the road.

40.

A number in Shurabad, forwarded twice.

She rang me eleven days later.

I want to explain how that is possible, because it is not a coincidence and I have checked it from every angle.

When I signed a piece of paper for my daughter in a shrine in Khorasan, I put a stamp on it, and under the stamp, as you do, the shrine's telephone number. That paper is in a court file in Tehran and a copy of it is in her plastic wallet with everything else, because she is a girl who has been to eleven offices and she keeps everything.

She rang the shrine. The trustee's grandson answered. He gave her a number for the man who had been custodian, which was a mobile

I had used for four months and abandoned, and that number had been recycled and belonged by then to a shop in Neyshabur, and the shop had, for reasons I will never establish, my new one.

Three steps. Any one of them fails and none of this happens. All three held.

I was standing at the side of a road outside a town I do not intend to name, waiting for a lift, at about four in the afternoon.

She said, "Is that Sayyid Vahedi?"

Twenty years. I have had twenty years and I still do not know what I would have done differently, and I have had every version of it, including the one where I say the true sentence, and in that version she puts the phone down and does not ring back and I never hear her voice again.

I said, "It is."

And she said — cheerfully, quickly, the way she says everything, my mouth on her, my mother's timing — "You probably don't remember me. Golnar Fani. You signed a paper for me. About my father."

I said I remembered.

"I got married," she said. "In Ordibehesht. The court took it, in the end. It took eight months and four more offices but it took it."

I said that was good.

"So." A pause. "There's a thing. In Bahman. It's not a wedding, it's after the wedding, my husband's family do a thing, and my mother's coming, and there's a — look, it's stupid, I've been trying to work out how to say this for two days."

I did not say anything.

"You're the only person," she said, "who ever gave me an answer about him that I could actually use. Everybody else wanted me to arrive somewhere. You said I was allowed. And I wrote it down and I've still got it on my phone and I have read it, honestly, probably a hundred times."

The road. A lorry going past. My hand on a telephone.

"I'd like you to come," she said. "If you can. I know it's a long way and I know you must get asked all the time. But I'd like there to be one person there who knows the whole of it."

One person there who knows the whole of it.

I stood at the side of a road in a dead man's shoes, oiled twice and left overnight, and was invited to my daughter's celebration by my daughter, in the character of the priest I invented in order to avoid being her father, on the grounds that I am the only person alive who knows the truth about her.

Which is correct.

I said I would try to come.

She said, "Really?"

And I said, "Really."

And she made a small noise — one syllable, out of the nose, entirely with pleasure, and I had heard it before, on the other side of a desk in a shrine office, when she was doing nine minutes about me and I laughed at the good bit.

I have not put the telephone down yet. That is not a figure of speech; I am telling you where I am. Everything you have read from the first page was written in the ninety days between that afternoon and Bahman, and I wrote it because I did not know what else to do with my hands, and because you are going to have to know all of it before you can understand what I did next.

Somebody is going to have to be standing in that room in Bahman.

I have been three men.

I do not yet know how many I will need.

GLOSSARY

Ab-Bidar aab-bee-DAAR — Persian. water-waking. A village name of a common Iranian type; the settlement in this book is invented.

ampul am-POOL — from the French ampoule. A sealed glass vial of injectable medicine. In Iranian usage, the injection itself, and by extension the mark of a serious consultation.

Attar at-TAAR — Farid ud-Din Attar of Neyshabur, c. 1145–c. 1221, Persian poet and apothecary; the name means perfumer, druggist. Author of *Manteq al-Tayr*.

chelleh chel-LEH — Persian. from *chehel*, forty. A period of forty days or nights undertaken for devotion, mourning, retreat or petition.

esfand es-FAND — Persian. the seed of wild rue, *Peganum harmala*, burned on coals against the evil eye. Its crackle is recognised by every Iranian.

Khorasan kho-raa-SAAN — The great north-eastern province of Iran, historically far larger; Neyshabur, Mashhad and Sabzevar all lie within it.

Manteq al-Tayr man-TEGH ot-TAYR — Arabic. The Speech of the Birds, known in English as *The Conference of the Birds*. Attar's allegorical poem of c. 1177, in which the birds of the world set out across seven valleys to find their king, the Simorgh. Each bird first offers an excuse for not going: the nightingale is in love with a rose, the duck cannot leave the water, the peacock wants his old garden back. Their guide is the hoopoe.

muqanni mo-ghan-NEE — Arabic. via Persian, one who works the qanat. The hereditary trade of digging and maintaining underground water tunnels. Among the oldest continuously practised professions in Iran, and among the most dangerous.

Nowruz now-ROOZ — Persian. new day. The Iranian new year, at the spring equinox; the calendar's first day and the country's principal festival, older than Islam.

qanat gha-NAAT — Arabic. via Persian, channel. A gently sloping tunnel dug by hand from an aquifer at the foot of a mountain to a settlement on the plain, bringing water by gravity with no pump. Vertical shafts every thirty to forty metres serve for spoil removal and ventilation. Some in Iran have run for more than two thousand years.

serum seh-ROM — from the Latin via French. In Iranian usage, an intravenous drip, and by extension the most serious grade of treatment short of surgery.

Simorgh see-MORGH — Persian. from the Middle Persian senmurw. The great bird of Persian myth, who appears in the Shahnameh as the protector of Zal, and in Attar as the king the birds go to find.

taarof taa-ROF — Arabic. via Persian. The Iranian system of ritual courtesy: offers that must be refused, refusals that must be overridden, and prices that must be waved away. Fluency in it is a social requirement and its misuse is a weapon.

toman toh-MAAN — from the Mongolian tümen, ten thousand. The unit Iranians count in, equal to ten rials. Prices are quoted in tomans and printed in rials, and everyone converts silently, forever.

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

A burglar gets off a bus in a village of four hundred people on a dying qanat, carrying a stolen stethoscope and a laminated card. Nobody assumes anything. They have been expecting a locum for eleven months and have been told about six of them. Five did not come.

He intends four days.

What follows is the account he wrote afterwards: forty numbered notes from a man who cannot read a drug name, discovering that most of what a rural clinic does is reassurance, referral and being unhurried — and that a village with no doctor for eleven months has not therefore had no medicine.

There is a nurse who has signed a broken man's name four hundred and eleven times and knows the number. There is a well-digger of seventy-four who has gone down the same hole four hundred and eleven times and has never once been asked what it is like down there.

And there is a rubber ring, the price of a chicken, that has not come for nine months.

He took the bag because it was on a rack and nobody was under it.

He did not intend to be a doctor.

C H E W Z

FROM THURSDAY NIGHTS

ROYA PUBLICATIONS

