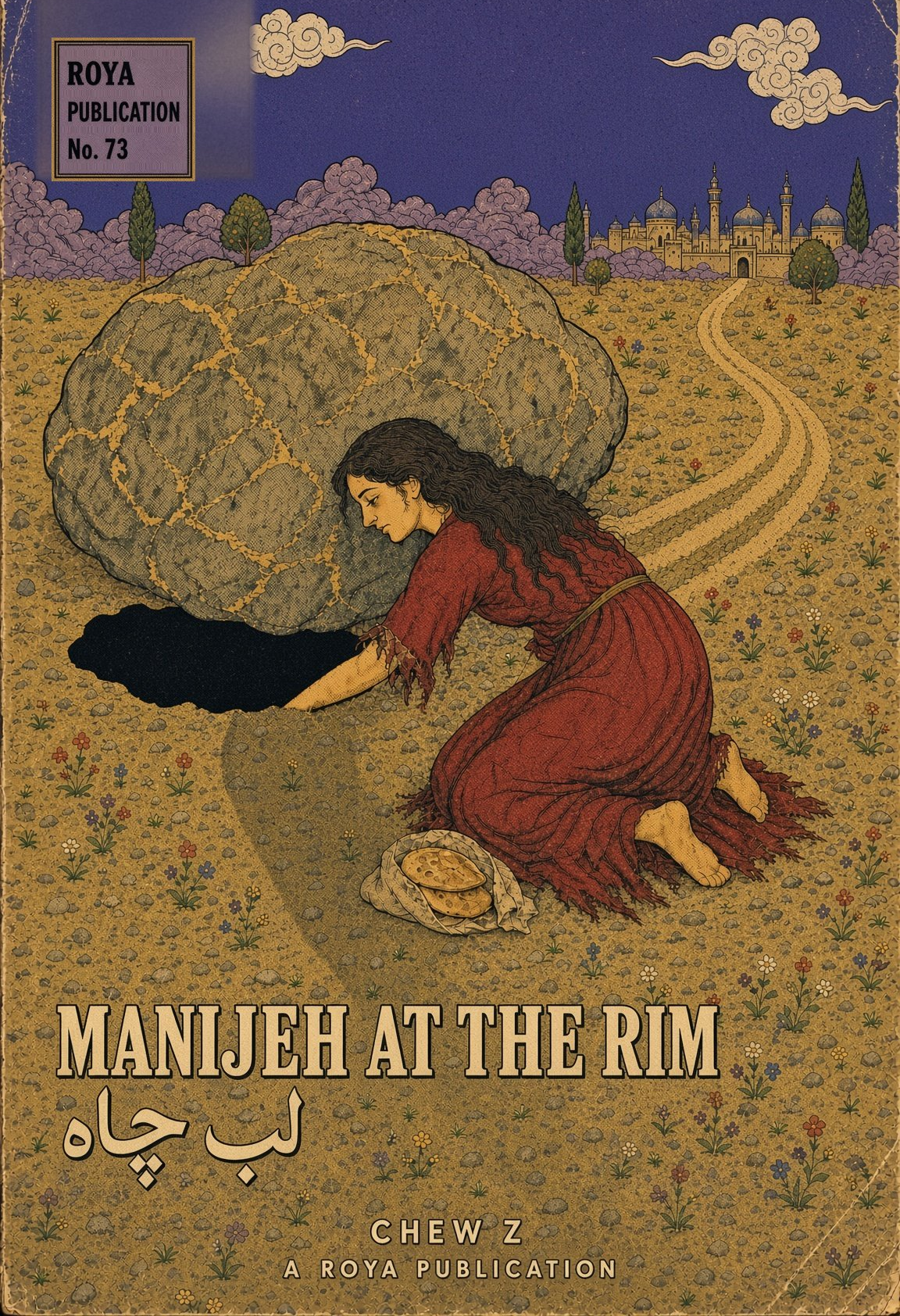


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 73



MANIJEH AT THE RIM

لب چاه

CHEW Z
A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 73

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

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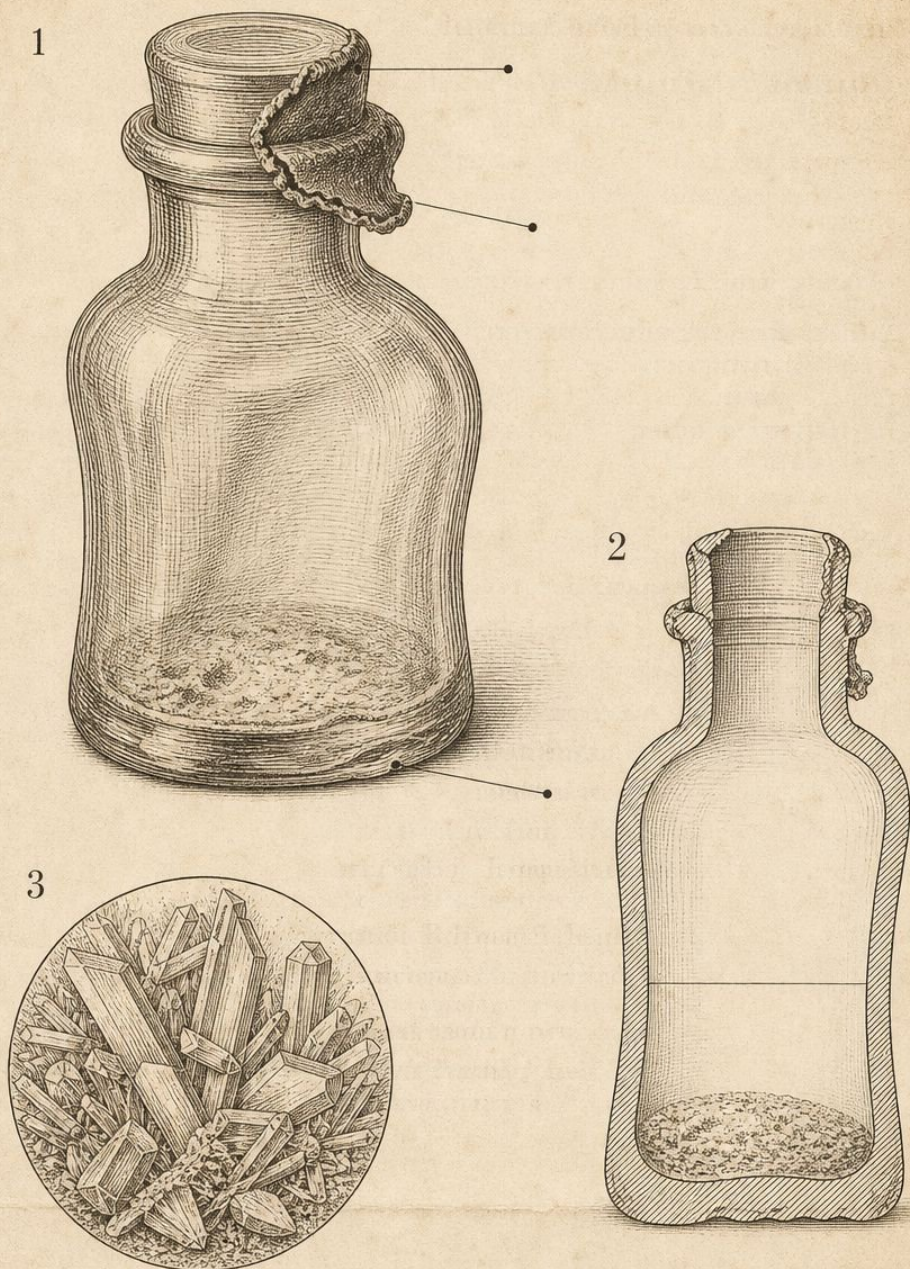
Roya Publications

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FROM THE OLD BOOK

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach



Phial, glass, from a household chest, with the wax seal broken. Residue shown at forty times.

SYNOPSIS

A king's daughter is given a hole in the ground as an address.

Her name is Manijeh. Eleven springs running she has taken tents out to the same festival ground two days inside the Turanian border, and nothing has ever happened there. This spring a young man in Byzantine silk and a crown appears alone at the treeline, looking at the wrong thing, and her first clear thought is that somebody is going to get him killed.

She is right, and she does it herself. On the third afternoon, rather than lose him, she puts the household medicine in his wine and has him carried out asleep in a chest with the baggage.

They are found. Her father takes her rank, her women, her rings and her shoes, walks her out to the pit where he has put the Iranian, and tells her that this is her house and home now, and gets on his horse.

So she begs. Door to door, all day, in a town where everyone knows exactly who she used to be, and carries what she is given out to a hole she cannot reach into and cannot see down.

She does this for eleven months. Nobody helps her. Nobody thanks her. And she can never be certain, on any single day of it, that the man at the bottom is still alive to receive anything.

There is one thing she has that nobody searched her for, and it is sewn into the hem of what she is wearing.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

A thousand years ago, in a town called Tus in the northeast of Iran, a man sat down to write a poem and did not stand up again for thirty years.

His name was Ferdowsi. The old stories of his country — the kings, the heroes, the monsters, the wars — had been carried in Middle Persian books and in people's mouths for centuries, and they were slipping. So he collected them, all of them, from the first man to sit on a throne down to the last Persian king, and put them into verse. Fifty thousand couplets. He called it the *Shāhnāma*, the Book of Kings. It cost him most of what he had, and he did not live to see it work.

It worked. Persian is still spoken. The stories are still known. Children in Tehran are still named after the people in this book.

Here is the part you need.

Long ago a king called Fereydun grew old, and he had three sons, and he divided the world between them: the west to Salm, the east — the lands beyond the river, called Turan — to Tur, and Iran, the middle of it and the best of it, to the youngest, Iraj. The two older brothers looked at what the youngest had been given and could not bear it. They killed him.

Everything after that is that murder, repeating. The wars between Iran and Turan that fill most of the poem are not wars between strangers. They are one family, several hundred years into an argument about an inheritance, and both sides know it, and neither side can stop. The border in this book is two days' ride wide. The people on either side of it eat the same food and grieve the same way and are cousins.

Closer in: an Iranian prince called Siyavash was accused of something he had not done, and proved it by riding a horse through a wall of fire and coming out the other side with his clothes unmarked — and then found that being proved innocent changed nothing, and went into exile across the border. The Turanian king

Afrasiyab took him in and gave him a daughter to marry. A great Turanian lord named Piran protected him. He was murdered there anyway, on his knees, far from home.

That murder is the wound the rest of the epic is built around. Siyavash's son Kay Khosrow, hidden as a baby by that same Piran, became the great king of Iran and spent his whole reign avenging his father. He owned a cup, and when he looked into it he could see the whole earth, anywhere, anyone.

And then, in the middle of all that war, Ferdowsi stops.

He writes thirty-seven lines about a night at his own house. It is black outside — no Mars, no Saturn, no Mercury, the whole sky switched off. He calls out for a lamp, and a woman comes into the garden carrying a candle, and wine, and pomegranate and citron and quince, and a good cup. She plays music for him. She tells him to put his sadness down. And then she says: *there is a story in the old book. If you'll listen, you can put it into verse.*

She has the book. He doesn't. She knows the story. He doesn't.

So the most famous love story in the Persian language reaches us secondhand, from a woman whose name we do not know, out of a book nobody has ever seen.

And the story she tells him is about a man at the bottom of a pit in the dark, kept alive for months by a woman above him who has nothing, and who brings him what she has begged.

Ferdowsi does not point out that these are the same shape. He puts them next to each other and gets on with it.

This is that story.

Chew Z

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I. THE GARDEN

1.

I want to start with what I had, because you never saw any of it.

Six things.

A tent, which was mine, which I had chosen the cloth for when I was nineteen and had mended myself twice because I would not let anyone else do it.

A woman called Golnar [gol-NAAR], who had fed me when I was a baby and who was still, at fifty-something, the only person in that house who told me when I was being stupid.

Two other women, whose names I will give you later and who were kind to me and who I did not know well, which was my fault and not theirs.

A horse.

A garden two days' ride from the border, which was not really a garden, which was a piece of ground I turned into one every spring.

And a father who had never once told me no.

That last one is the important one and I want you to hold on to it. Not because he loved me. I have thought about that for a long time now and I still do not know. But because in that house saying no to me was work, and there was already a great deal of work, and I was the thing that did not need managing.

So I did what I liked. For years. And nobody stopped me, and I thought that was what being loved looked like, and it was very nearly the same thing from the inside.

2.

The festival is an old one and nobody in my country can tell you what it is for.

It happens when the ground dries. You take tents out to a place that has water and shade, and you stay for a few days, and there is music, and people who have been indoors all winter look at each other again.

I had gone out to that same ground every spring since I was eleven.

Eleven times, then. Eleven springs of the same grass, the same broken wall at the north end where somebody's fort used to be, the same two days on the road with the carts going too slowly.

And in eleven years nothing had ever happened there.

Let me tell you who came, because that matters later and nobody has ever asked.

Women, mostly. Wives of men who hold things. Daughters of men who hold things. Three or four families who had been coming since before I was born and who set up in the same places every year and argued about it anyway. Musicians, hired. A man who sold cloth and who was tolerated because his cloth was good. Children, far too many, running in and out of tents that were not theirs.

No soldiers. I want to be exact about that because of what is said now. There were four men with the carts and their job was the carts.

The border is two days off. Everybody knew that. It was said the way you say a river is over there — a fact about the landscape, not a thing that could come and find you.

I want that written down, because of what people say now. They say a king's daughter had no business camping two days from a hostile border with a hundred women and no soldiers. They say it as though it were obvious.

It was not obvious. It was eleven years of nothing. It was the safest place I knew.

And it was the same three days every year, and the same ground, and anybody who had ever ridden that road in the spring would have known exactly where to find me.

3.

My uncle came to dinner.

He came to dinner every week of my life. He is not a large man and he is not a loud one. He eats slowly. He asks after your health and he listens to the answer, which most people at that table did not.

When I was small he used to bring me dried fruit in a cloth and let me eat it before the meal, which I was not allowed, and he never once told my father.

His name is Garsivaz [gar-SEE-vaz]. He is my father's brother.

And he is the man who, over about a year, said the right small things at the right small moments until my father had his own son-in-law killed.

Everybody knows this. Nobody says it. He still comes to dinner, and my father still asks his opinion, and he still gives it slowly, and he still asks after your health.

I want you to understand that I grew up watching that and thought it was ordinary. It was the only house I had. You do not stand in your own kitchen thinking: this is a machine for destroying people.

You think: my uncle is here. He has brought something.

4.

The son-in-law was called Siyavash [see-yaa-VASH].

I was nine or ten. He came out of Iran with nothing, because his own king had turned on him, and my father took him in and gave him my sister, and for a few years he lived in our house and he was the best thing in it.

I remember his hands. That is a strange thing to keep, but it is what I have. He had long hands and he used them when he talked, and he built things — he built a whole town, in the end, out on the plain, and it had a wall and a garden and he made me walk round it with him and asked what I thought of it.

Nobody had ever asked me what I thought of anything.

The town was called after him and it had a wall the height of two men and a watercourse he had dug himself, or had stood over while it was dug, which in that house amounted to the same thing. He put a garden in the middle of it. He asked me where the trees should go, and I said something, and he did it.

I was nine. I have never got over being asked.

Then my uncle started talking, and my father started listening, and it went on for the better part of a year, and I was in the house for all of it and I noticed nothing at all. That is the thing I want you to have. I was a child in a house where a man was being killed slowly at dinner, over months, in front of me, and what I remember of that year is a pony.

I remember the house the next morning. Not the killing — I was not there and nobody would tell me anything. The morning after. Everyone doing their work slightly too carefully. A woman crying in a corridor and stopping when she saw me. The particular quiet of a household that has all agreed on something without saying it.

Nobody explained. That is not a complaint; it is how that house worked. A man was there and then he was not, and the household closed over the place where he had been like water, and within a season the servants had stopped lowering their voices.

That is what my father's house is. It is a place where a thing happens and then everybody is very careful for a week.

from the old book

*He built a town on the plain in a country that was not his, with a wall
and a garden and a place in it for everybody, and he walked people
round it and asked them what they thought. Two years later the king
who had let him build it had him killed. The town is still in the poem.
Nobody lives in it.*

5.

My sister went to Iran.

She was carrying, when it happened. She got out — that is a whole story and it is not mine — and she went over the border and she had the child there, and the child grew up, and the child is now the king of Iran.

So the man on that throne is my sister's son.

She got out in the winter with a man who owed her husband nothing, and my father sent people after her, and they did not find her, and I have never been able to decide how hard they looked.

I was ten or eleven. Nobody told me she had gone. I worked it out over about a fortnight, from the number of places set and from a door that stopped being opened, and when I finally asked, a woman told me my sister had gone to visit family, and then looked at me to see whether I would take it.

I took it. You learn very early in a house like that what a question costs.

Nobody in my father's house says her name. Nobody says the boy's. It is not forbidden. It is simply that there is a shape in every conversation that people go around, and after a while you stop noticing you are going around it.

I did not see her again. I have not seen her since I was ten years old and I could still tell you exactly how she laughed.

I am telling you this once and I am not going to bring it up again.

6.

The garden was mine and I was good at it.

I want to be plain about this because it is the only thing I was ever good at that anybody could see. I could not ride particularly. I was not clever the way my cousins were clever. I could look at a piece of dry ground with a broken wall on it and know exactly where the light would be at seven in the evening, and I could put a tent there,

and lamps in a tree, and it would be the most beautiful place any of those people had ever stood in.

It took eleven days. Every year. Eleven days of carts and rope and arguing with men about where the water goes.

And on the first evening people would come out of their tents and stop, and look, and not know why they had stopped.

That was mine. That was the whole of what I had. I made a place where people were briefly happier than they had any reason to be, once a year, for three days, and then I took it down and went home.

7.

The morning of the first day was an ordinary morning.

Golnar woke me too early because she always did. There was an argument about a horse. One of the women had been sick in the night and was better. The bread came late from the carts and somebody was sent back for it and came back with the wrong thing.

I had a headache from the wine the night before, not badly. Two of the children had got into the cloth-seller's stock and there had been a scene, and he wanted somebody spoken to, and I said I would and did not.

I went out at about the middle of the morning to look at the tree, because on the last day the lamps come down and somebody always breaks one, and I wanted to count them first.

I counted them. There were nineteen. There had been twenty at the start of the week, which is better than most years.

I want that entry to be that dull. I have thought about it a great deal and I will not make it into an omen. People want the day to have had something in it. They want me to say the air was strange, or that I woke early, or that I had dreamt of somebody.

There was no feeling. There was no strangeness in the air. It was the first day of an eleventh spring, I had a headache, there were nineteen lamps in the tree, and I was thinking about whether we had enough oil to fill them one more time.

8.

Then I looked up and there was a man at the treeline.

He was alone. That was the first thing. Nobody comes to that ground alone.

He was on a horse, not moving, at the edge of the trees where the ground goes up, and he was wearing — you know what you were wearing. Byzantine silk. A gold belt. A crown, on a hillside, in the middle of the morning, in a country that has been at war with yours for four hundred years.

My first thought was: that man is a fool.

I want you to have that, because you have never let me tell you. It was not the moon and it was not fate. I looked at you and I thought, quite clearly: *somebody is going to get that boy killed*.

And then I looked for a while longer.

You were not looking at the tents. That is what turned it. Every man who has ever stood at the edge of that ground looked at the tents. You were looking at the tree with the lamps in it. You had not worked out yet that somebody had put them there. You were just looking at it, the way you look at weather.

And I thought: he has no idea where he is.

And then I thought the other thing, and I am not going to write that one down.

9.

I sent Golnar.

She did not want to go. I want that recorded, since it matters later and since she was right. She said: *he is Iranian*. I said I knew that. She said: *do you know what your father would do*. I said I knew that too, which was a lie, because I did not know the half of it, and neither did she, and I have wondered since whether that is true.

She went across the wet grass with her skirts up. It had rained in the night and the grass went dark where she walked, and I watched the two lines of it, out and back.

She was gone a long time. Longer than the question needed.

When she came back she did not tell me what he had said. She said: *he will come*. And then she went to see about the oil for the lamps, because there was still a festival happening and somebody had to run it.

Here is the second list.

A tent. Golnar. Two women. A horse. A garden. A father who had never told me no.

Six things, exactly the same six, and I had already begun to count them differently, and I could not have told you why.

from the old book

There was a girl in a tower whose father would rather have died than let her have him, and a man below with white hair that had frightened his own father into leaving him on a mountain. She let her hair down out of the window and told him to climb it. He would not — he would not put his weight on her — so he threw a rope instead. That is the whole of it. Everyone remembers the hair. He used a rope.

II. BAREFOOT

10.

You came in and sat down and were immediately, obviously out of your depth, and did not seem to mind.

That is the thing I did not expect. A man in a crown in an enemy camp ought to be frightened or he ought to be arrogant, and you were neither. You were interested. You asked what the festival was for and I said nobody knows, and you laughed as though I had made a joke, and I had not, and then you thought about it and said that was probably true of most things.

You ate too fast. You had been on a horse for two days.

You were funnier than I had any reason to expect and you were funny at your own expense, which men in that house never were. When I said something about the crown you took it off and looked at it and put it back on, and said, *I know*.

And underneath all of it you were about twenty-six and you had just done something enormous, and it was coming off you the way heat comes off a wall at the end of a day.

I did not ask what. You would have told me. I did not ask because I did not want the evening to become about that.

11.

I told you my father was a king.

I did not tell you which king. I want to be honest about that, because for a long time afterwards I let myself believe I had said it and you had not been listening.

I said: my father is a difficult man. I said: my uncle is worse and everybody pretends he is not. I said something about my sister that I had never said out loud to anyone, and you did not push, and I have thought about that more than I have thought about anything else you did in three days.

What I did not say was the name.

If I had said it you would have been on your horse within the hour, and you would be alive somewhere with a wife from a good house

in Isfahan [es-fa-HAAN], and none of this would have happened to either of us.

I have gone round that a great many times. I always come back to the same place: I did not say it because I wanted you to stay another day, and I told myself I would say it tomorrow, and then tomorrow was the third day.

12.

I want to tell you what I sent Golnar to ask, because you have never once asked me and I think you assume you know.

I sent her to ask how many men were with you.

That is all. That is the whole question. A man from Iran turns up alone at the edge of a camp full of women two days from the border, and the first thing anybody raised in my father's house wants to know is where the rest of them are. Not out of fear. Out of arithmetic. You find out the number and then you decide what kind of afternoon you are having.

She came back and said *he will come*.

She did not give me a number. I noticed that, and then the day happened, and I stopped noticing it for a year.

She was gone a long time. I said that already. Longer than one question takes.

13.

Three days.

I have all of it and I am going to spend it here, because I know how little you kept and I would rather you had mine than nothing.

The first night you would not sit near the harp because you said you would rather hear it from further off, which was the first thing you said that I thought about afterwards.

You told me about a river you swam in as a boy and a man called Shabrang who turned out to be your horse. You told me your grandfather had buried seventy sons and grandsons and that he sat

through funerals without moving his hands, and you told it as a joke and it was not one, and you knew it was not one halfway through and finished it anyway.

The second night the lamps in the tree went out one at a time because nobody had filled them properly, and neither of us got up.

I put my hand flat on the cloth of the floor, near yours, not touching. It stayed there most of an evening. Neither of us said anything about it, and we did not move them, and it went on for so long that my arm ached and I would not have moved it for anything in the world.

That was the second night. You are not sure which night it was. I am.

The third morning you were up before me and had been out to look at the horses and had come back with wet boots, and you did not know that I saw you standing outside the tent for a moment before you came in, working out what your face should be doing.

14.

The camp had to come down on the third day. That is not a decision anyone makes. The ground goes over to somebody else, the carts are hired, it ends.

I went to the chest where the medicine is kept.

Every household of any size has it. You use it for setting bones and for pulling teeth and for the nights when somebody is dying badly. It is kept locked, and I had the key, because I had the keys to everything.

I want to be plain here and then I want to move on.

I did not agonise. I did not sit on the floor of that tent and weigh it. I went to the chest and I took what I needed and I came back and I poured it, and the whole of it took about as long as it takes to read this, and I watched you drink it and I did not look away.

People want me to be sorry. My father wanted me to be sorry. There is a version of me they would all have preferred, who wept and said she did not know what came over her.

I knew exactly what came over me. I have never once been sorry. I have been many other things.

from the old book

*There was a queen who wanted her husband's son and was refused,
and so she said he had wanted her, and tore her own clothes to prove
it. Everything that happened after — the fire, the exile, the knife in
another country — came out of a woman being told no in a room with
nobody else in it. The poem blames her. The poem does not ask what
else she had.*

15.

The chest was cedar and it was too small for you and I packed it myself.

I did not let the women do it. I did not want anybody able to say later that they had. I put cloth in round you, at the shoulders and under the knees, so that you would not sound like cargo when the cart went over stone, and I put the lid down and I did not lock it, which people find strange when I tell them and which seems to me the most obvious thing in the world.

You went out on the third cart. Not the first — the first is watched. The third.

We left the grass a little after dark and there was a stretch of dirt road, and then the river, and the cart tips back going up the far bank and everything in it slides.

The gate we came in by is on the east side, where the deliveries go. There is a run of bad stone there, about forty paces of it, and everything on every cart complains through the whole of it, and I have hated that stretch of ground since I was a child.

Then the courtyard. Then the corridor.

There is a lamp in that corridor, in a niche, about two-thirds of the way along. It is on the right. I have walked that corridor perhaps ten thousand times and the light from it goes up the wall and across the ceiling and it is the shape of a leaf.

Three turns and then my own door.

16.

You were in my rooms for ten days.

The women knew by the second morning. Of course they knew. You cannot bring that much food into a room and take that much water out of it and have nobody know.

They said nothing. Not out of loyalty exactly — out of the thing that is underneath loyalty in a house like mine, which is that nobody wants to be the one who spoke.

There was one who did not know, a girl of about fourteen who had come from my aunt's household and who was too new to read a corridor. I have thought about her since. She used to sing while she carried things, badly, and after the arrest I never saw her again, and I do not know what that means and I have decided not to find out.

The practical side of it was this. Food came in on the same trays as always and went out with more eaten. Water came twice a day and went out twice a day, and the second time it went out heavier, and there is no way to disguise that. You cannot open a window in those rooms. You cannot cross the corridor. For ten days you did not stand upright in daylight.

I told two of the women. I did not tell the third, and I have never been able to work out whether that was judgement or cowardice.

We played a game with the dice that were in the room, badly, for hours, because it was the only thing two people can do quietly.

Ten days. You were not frightened. That is the part I could not understand at the time. You lay in a strange woman's rooms in the middle of your enemy's palace and you were interested in the ceiling.

I asked you about it once, near the end. You said you had decided on the second day that there was nothing you could do about any of it, and that once a man has genuinely decided that, he sleeps.

17.

The man at the door is called Bahram [bah-RAAM] and he has stood there since before I was born.

I have said good morning to him something like ten thousand times. He has a bad hip. He has three sons and one of them is not well and I know that because I asked, once, years ago, and he told me, and after that he told me every few months whether there was any change.

He counts what goes in. That is his whole life and it is not nothing — he is the only person in that building who genuinely understands it.

He worked out that a chest had gone in and had not come out, and that one set of rooms was being sent more food than the people in it could eat.

He did not come to me.

I do not blame him and I want that written down. He has three sons and a bad hip and thirty years of standing at a door, and I had a father, and the arithmetic is not difficult. If he had come to me he would have had to trust me with his life, and I had never given him a single reason to think he could.

Good morning, ten thousand times, is not a reason.

18.

My father asked me one question.

This was before the shouting. People always assume the shouting was the bad part. The shouting was easy — it was loud and it was about honour and it was for the room.

Before that, in a small room with the door shut and only the two of us, he sat down opposite me and asked, quite gently, in the voice he used when I was small:

Did he come to you, or did you go to him?

And I understood the question. I want to be clear that I understood it perfectly, at the time, in the moment, with my whole mind working.

If he came to me, then an Iranian entered Turan [too-RAAN] and put his hands on the king's daughter, and that is an act of war, and there is a body and a letter and a border and nobody is anybody's fault.

If I went to him, it is a girl's crime. It is small. It is mine. It goes no further than the two people in it.

And if I said the first one you would have been dead before the evening.

So I said: I went to him.

I said it clearly. I did not cry. My father looked at me for a while and then he nodded once, and he stood up, and he went out and started the shouting.

I have had a long time to think about the way he nodded.

19.

They put the frame up in the yard and I was made to stand where I could see it.

It takes a long time to put a gallows up. Nobody tells you that. Two men and a cart and most of a morning, and they stop for water, and one of them was laughing at something the other had said.

I stood where I had been put and watched two men build the thing that was going to kill you and stop halfway through for a drink.

Then the great man came in on a horse and went inside, and I could hear a voice going on and on in a room, and after a while the frame came down again, and I did not understand what had happened and nobody told me.

They took it down more slowly than they had put it up. I remember that. There was no hurry in it at all.

That was the best hour of my life and I spent it thinking you were being hanged.

Then a cart, before dawn, and open ground with no trees on it, and a hole with old spoil beside it, and two men holding my arms because somebody had decided I should watch.

They took your ankles.

I am not going to describe it. There is a sound and I have it and I am keeping it.

Then the elephants, and the stone, and the light going off the ground the way it does when a cloud comes over, except that it was not a cloud and it did not pass.

20.

My father came and stood next to me at the edge of the hole.

He was not angry any more. That is the thing about him that nobody outside the family understands. The anger is for rooms with people in them. Out there it was just the two of us and some men holding horses, and he was tired, and he had a long ride back.

He took my rank. He took the women. He took the rings off my fingers himself, one at a time, without hurrying, and gave them to a man to carry.

Then he took my shoes.

And then he said the thing that everyone in two countries has now heard, and I want to tell you that he did not say it cruelly. He said it the way you would tell somebody where to find the kitchen.

Here is your house. Here is your home. You are bound to this one, here, for ever.

Then he got on his horse.

Here is the third list.

The clothes I was wearing.

And what was sewn into the hem of them, which nobody searched for, because nobody searches a princess for the thing she has already used.

Two things.

from the old book

*When they hid the child from the king, they gave him to a cow to feed,
and she fed him for three years in a place with no name. When the king
could not find the child he found the cow, and killed her for it. The
poem gives her a name. Nobody ever asks what the three years were
like.*

III. THE BREAD

21.

I talked into the hole all night and nothing came back.

I want you to know what that was like from up there, because you have your version and I have never given you mine.

I lay on my front with my face over the gap and I said your name. Then I said it again. Then I said something else, and then I said your name again, and I did that until the sky went grey.

The hole does something to a voice. It takes it and it does not give any of it back. You are talking into a mouth that swallows.

By about the middle of the night I had stopped believing there was anybody down there. Not decided — believing is not a decision. I simply noticed at some point that I was talking to a piece of ground.

And I kept going, because the alternative was to stop, and if I stopped I would have to work out what I was doing sitting in a field.

Some time before dawn I put my hand flat on the ground and left it there, because I had run out of things to say and I wanted to be doing something.

The ground out there holds the cold. I remember thinking that a man down in it would be colder than I was, and then thinking that I had no idea whether that was true, and then thinking that I had no idea about anything at all — not how deep it went, not whether there was water in it, not whether the fall had killed you on the way down.

That was the first night. I did not know one single fact about the place I had decided to spend my life at the edge of.

You have told me since that you heard a sound twice, with a pause, and that you decided it was nothing.

I have never argued with you about that.

22.

Bread does not go down a hole. That is the first thing I had to learn and it took me a week.

You cannot lower it. There is nothing to lower it with. You put your hand over the gap and open your fingers and after that it belongs to the dark.

It turns as it falls. It hits the wall. By the time it is anywhere near you it is not bread any more, it is four or five pieces of bread in four or five places on a floor you cannot see.

I worked out, eventually, that flat is better than round, and that stale is better than fresh because fresh tears itself apart, and that you must never drop two things at once because you will hear one land and go to it and lose the other.

I learned to come at first light, because bread got in the street in the afternoon is bread somebody has already decided they do not want, and because the walk out is two miles and I wanted it done before the heat.

I learned to carry it against my body rather than in my hands, because hands get taken.

I learned which of the two roads out of that town has a stretch where you cannot be seen from either end, and I learned to do the crying there, if there was going to be any, so that it was finished before I got to you.

And here is the part that took me longest.

I could not know whether you got it. Ever. Not once, in all of it. I put my hand over that gap and opened my fingers and then I sat there and listened to a man scrabbling on a floor eleven feet under me, and it sounded exactly the same whether he found it or not.

I used to ask. In the first months I used to call down, *did you get it*, and you always said yes.

I stopped asking around the fourth month, because I worked out that you would say yes whatever had happened, for the same reason I said I had been unwell.

23.

You asked me who I was.

I had told you twice by then. Once on the second night, when you were still not sure whether I was real, and once on the fourth, when you were.

The third time you asked I told you again, in exactly the same words, and I made my voice do the thing it does when a person is saying something for the first time.

That is when I understood what was wrong with you. Not the hunger. Not the dark. Something in you was letting go of things and did not know it was doing it, and if I had said *I have told you twice* you would have known too.

So I did not say it. I said my name as though it were new.

I have done a great many things in my life that I would take back. That one I would do again tomorrow.

24.

Here is the town.

There is a street on the east side where the doors give bread most days, and a better street two along where they never do. That is not a coincidence and it took me months to stop being surprised by it.

There is a house with a blue frame, and the woman in it comes out every single day with something, and has never once spoken to me. Not a greeting. Not a blessing. She puts it in my hands and shuts the door. I have never seen her face properly because she does not lift it. I do not know her name. I would put my hand in a fire for her.

There is a baker who leaves what is going stale on the sill after the second call to work, and then goes inside and stands where he cannot see the sill. He has done that for a year. If you thanked him he would stop.

There is a man on the north road who set his dog on me once. Then a few days later he called it off before it reached the gate, and stood there, and went in. He has never given me anything. He has

never set it on me again. I think about him more than I think about the woman with the blue door, and I know that is wrong, and I do it anyway.

There is a family on the south side who gave generously for about six weeks and then stopped completely, and I have never known whether somebody spoke to them or whether they simply got tired, and I went back for another month before I accepted it.

There is a woman who gives me something almost every time and makes me stand there while she says a great deal about how sorry she is for me. That is the hardest door on the round. I go to it last, when I am too tired to mind.

There are two houses where the children are sent out to look at me. Not cruelly. They are curious, and their mothers let them be curious, and one of them once asked me whether it was true that I had been a princess, and I said yes, and she said *oh* and went inside.

That is eleven months of my life in seven paragraphs. Every item cost a morning.

And the worst of it is not the doors. It is that I became good at this. By the end I could read a house from the street. I knew which shutters meant somebody was at home and pretending not to be, and I knew the exact hour on each street when a woman is between jobs and will answer, and I laid the round out the way I used to lay out the garden, and it worked, and I was proud of it, and there is nobody I can ever say that to.

25.

You asked me how you got there.

You asked it the way a man asks about weather. That is what frightened me — not that you did not know, but that you were not frightened of not knowing.

So I told you.

I started at the third day of the festival and I went forward, and I did not rush, and when you stopped me I went back and filled it in and found my place again.

It took several nights. You were happier afterwards than I had heard you. You said something about having your story back.

I remember exactly where I was sitting when you said that, and I remember thinking: *good*. And then I remember lying awake later on the ground next to a hole in Turan with my arms round my knees, thinking about the word *back*.

26.

I did not tell you all of it.

I left out the question I sent Golnar with, because it makes me sound like my father's daughter, and by then I had begun to need you to think well of me, which is its own kind of danger in a place like that.

I left out what my father asked me in the small room, and what I answered, because you would have taken it as a debt and you had nothing to pay with.

I left out that I had watched you go in.

None of those are lies. I want that understood. I have been called a great many things by people in two countries and I have never once said anything to you that was not true.

And there is a fourth thing, which is that after a while I lost track of what I had already left out. That is what happens when you keep two versions of a year in your head at the same time and only one of them out loud.

So I began to be careful in a way I had not been careful before. I would go over it on the walk in, deciding what was in and what was not, the way you would go over a speech.

By about the eighth month I was not telling you what had happened. I was performing a version of it that I had rehearsed on a road.

But there is a shape you make when you leave three things out of a story, and after a while the shape is doing more work than the story is.

from the old book

When they killed her husband she was carrying, and they came for her too, and a man who owed nothing to anybody hid her, and then hid the child, and told the child to seem simple so the king would let him live.

She spent years in a country that had murdered the only person she had, being polite at dinner. The poem does not say what that was like either.

27.

Then it rained.

Not rain the way you get it in the spring. This came in off the flat with nothing in front of it and it went on for most of a night, and the ground out there does not drink — it sits on top and finds the low places and runs.

I heard the hole start to fill. That is a sound I would like to give back.

And I could not get to you.

I want to put that as plainly as I can. The ground round the rim went to mud and then the mud started moving, and there is a slope on the north side, and by the time I understood what was happening I was already sliding towards a hole in the dark with my hands full of nothing.

If I had gone in, that was both of us.

So I went. There is a wall at the edge of the north field, what is left of somebody's sheep pen, and I got behind it and I sat there with my back against it and the water coming through and I stayed until it was light.

That is the entry. That is what happened.

I did not stay. I did not talk all night. I left you in a filling hole and I sat behind a wall four hundred paces away and I could not hear anything from there at all, which is why I chose it.

And at some point in the worst part of that night, with the water in my clothes and no way of knowing whether the thing I had been feeding for months was already drowned, I put my hand into the hem and I held what is in it for a while.

I did not do anything. Obviously. I am writing this.

But I held it, and I was not thinking about you when I did, and that is the whole of what I have never told you and now have.

I went back at first light. The water had gone down. You were alive.

You have told me, more than once, in your kind way, that I stayed all night and talked until the light came. You have said it to other people. You said it to your father.

I have never corrected you. I am not correcting you now. I am only writing down what I did.

28.

My feet went first.

I had no shoes from the day my father took them and there is no soft ground anywhere between that hole and that town. By the second month the soles were not skin any more, they were something else, and they did not hurt, which frightened me more than the hurting had.

I stopped bleeding, in the way women do, somewhere around the fourth month. I was not surprised. There was not enough of me left to run a body that ambitious.

My hair went. Not out — down. The sun took the colour out of it and then the rest of it just gave up and lay there.

I ate last and I ate what was left, and some days what was left was the part that had been in the wet at the bottom of the bag.

None of that is the thing.

The thing is that after about six months I could not always remember what I had said to you the day before. And I needed to remember, because you were building a life out of what I said, and if I gave you two different versions of the same afternoon you would notice, and if you noticed you would start to wonder what else.

So I began keeping it in order in my head, every night, before I slept. Like counting money.

What I had told you. What I had not. What you believed about your father. What you believed about the man who had brought you there, which was mine and had to stay consistent. The order of the streets in the town, because I had described them to you and you had built them, and a town that changes shape is a town that stops being real.

It took about the length of time it takes to fall asleep, which meant that for the better part of a year the last thing I did every day was rehearse a man.

That is what it took out of me. Not the feet.

29.

I unpicked the hem once a month and sewed it back.

Not for any reason. The stitching was fine and it did not need doing. But it was the only thing I owned that could be maintained, and a person needs one of those or they come apart.

I had no needle for the first weeks. I used a thorn and it was terrible. Then the woman with the blue door put a needle in with the bread, once, without a word, and never did it again, and I have thought about that for a year.

So: unpick, look at what is in there, sew it back. Thirty stitches, small, in a line.

I did it at the same time of day, in the same place, sitting with my back to the stone on the side that keeps the afternoon off. It took the better part of an hour and I was in no hurry. I was good at it. My stitching was better at the end of that year than it had ever been in my father's house, where there had been no reason to be good at anything.

There is a thing that happens to your hands when you have not eaten properly for months, which is that they will do fine work perfectly well and then shake for an hour afterwards. I got round it by resting my wrists on my knees.

I never took it out. Looking is not taking it out.

Twice I found I had done the stitching twice in the same week and had not noticed. I want that in, because it is the only part of that year where I frightened myself.

And every time I did it I told myself the same thing, which is that a woman who still does small careful work with her hands is a woman who has not decided anything.

30.

The heat made things.

Yours came in the dark. I know that now. Mine came at noon, and mine were bright.

The first was water, which everybody knows about and which is not interesting. Then it was people on the road who were not on the road. Then, for about a week in the worst of the summer, it was a tent.

Not any tent. Mine. Up on the rise where the ground goes, with the cloth I chose when I was nineteen, and the lamps in the tree, and somebody moving about inside it doing the work.

It was there when I looked up and it was there when I looked back and it did not go when I stood.

I want to be accurate about what was wrong with it. It was not that I believed it. I knew what it was — I was not so far gone that I would have walked up that rise.

What was wrong with it is that I was pleased. I looked up out of a year of dirt and saw my own garden four hundred paces away and I was pleased, and I got on with the day, and it took me until evening to think: *that should not have been a nice thing.*

It came back most days for about a week and then it stopped, and I was sorry when it stopped, and I have never told anybody that either.

I did not tell you about it at the time. You were down there having your own trouble and I could hear it in you, and there is only room in an arrangement like ours for one person to be coming apart at once. So I said nothing, and went on describing the town to you, and left the tent out of the description.

Which means that for a week I stood over a hole telling a man about a street with a blue door on it while my own garden was standing behind me on the rise with somebody moving about inside it.

from the old book

The bird gave him three of her feathers and told him: when you have nothing, burn one, and I will come. He carried them for the rest of his life. He burned one, once, for his son. The other two went into the ground with him. Everyone remembers that she came. Nobody counts what it cost him to wait.

31.

You asked whether anyone was looking for you.

You asked it in the middle of an ordinary night, quietly, the way you asked most of the things that mattered, and then you did not push.

I had no idea. I want that on the record. I had less than no idea — I was a barefoot woman in a town on the wrong side of a border, and the only news that reached me came in on carts and was about grain.

So I made it.

I spent the whole of the next day on it. I walked to the south well and back thinking about it, which is four miles, and I built it the way I used to build the garden: what would have to be true, and in what order, and how long each piece would take.

A man does not go missing from that hall without the hall noticing. Your father is not the kind to swallow a story. It will take time, because it is two countries and a border and a lie to unpick — but the lie will come apart, and then somebody will ask the right question, and then they will come.

I brought it to the hole that night and I gave it to you like news.

You were better for weeks. Weeks. I would do it again and I would do it better.

32.

I told you about Forud [fo-ROOD].

I want this one written down carefully because I think it is the thing you would least like to know.

I did not get it out of you. You had never said the name. You had been down there most of a year by then and there were whole parts of your life you handed me without noticing and that one you never went near.

I knew it already.

Everybody in my country knows it. It is what Turan says about Iranians when Turan wants to say something. *They sent men up a*

mountain and killed Siyavash's boy in his own fort, seventeen years old, standing on the wall pleased to see them, and then they went home and gave each other things. I heard it first when I was about fourteen, at a table, from a man eating.

So one night you were low, and you were saying that you had been a decent man and could not now remember what it had been for, and I said: were you at the fort.

And you were quiet for a very long time.

And then you told me, and I let you, and afterwards you were lighter, and I thought: good.

You have said since that it came to you on its own, out of the dark, out of order, and that this is how you know it is yours. You have made rather a lot of that.

I am not going to take it off you. I have taken enough.

33.

I am going to tell you what I did, and I am not going to dress it up as a confession, because it was not one. It was work.

You came out of the drug and the fall with the middle of you gone.

Not your name — you had your name, you gave it to my father's soldiers with your back against a wall. But when I first lay down at that gap and started talking, I found that there was nothing behind it. You did not know how you had come to be in that hole. You did not know what you had done the month before. You had a hall with some men in it and a pig, and then nothing, and then me.

And a man in a hole who does not know who he is does not last a week. I have no proof of that. I knew it the way you know a horse is going to bolt.

So I built you.

Out of what my father's court said about the Iranian houses, which is a great deal and most of it admiring. Out of one afternoon in a tent when you talked about a river and a horse and your grandfather. Out of two things a captured man said in our hall

when I was nineteen. And out of what I needed you to be, which I am not going to pretend was nothing.

I made you kind. That was mine. I had no evidence for it and I put it in anyway, and then you were kind, all the way through, for a year, in conditions that give nobody the chance to pretend.

So I do not know any more whether I found that or made it, and neither do you, and there is no way left to check.

The Gorgin [gor-GEEN] I gave you is a man I have never met. I built him out of what a man like that would have to be, and you took him, and you have carried him ever since, and every time you talk about him you are quoting me.

I am not sorry about the wine and I am not sorry about this either.

But I want it written down somewhere that the man in that hole was partly my work, because if I am the only one who ever knows it, then when they pull you out I will be the only person alive who has met him.

34.

You tested me.

You waited a day so it would sound like nothing, and then you asked me about the harp player on the second evening — a small stupid thing, the sort of thing only somebody who had been sitting where you were sitting could know.

I knew what you were doing inside four words.

And I want you to understand that I could have failed it. I could have said *I do not remember* and let you have the truth. There was a whole heartbeat in there where that was available.

I got it right instead. I gave you the harp player. And then I let you sit up there in the dark thinking you had been subtle.

You never mentioned it again, which is how I know how much it cost you.

That is the closest thing to a marriage I am ever going to have: a man asking me a question he thought I could not hear the shape of, and me answering it, and both of us going on with the evening.

from the old book

*He owned a cup that showed him the whole earth, every clime,
anywhere, anyone. When they told him his man was missing he said:
wait for the new year. And they waited, and at the new year he looked,
and there he was. The poem tells this as a wonder. It is a wonder. It
does not say where the cup was kept in the meantime.*

35.

Then you asked me to keep going.

You knew by then. You had worked out that you could not tell your own life from the last thing you had been told, and that there was nothing down there to hold either of us against, and you asked me to keep talking anyway.

Tell me about the street with the blue door. Tell me what the baker did. Tell me the one about the fire again, I do not mind that I have had it.

I had been on that ground for something like eleven months at that point. I had no shoes and no name and no household, and there was not one person in that town or in my father's house or in your country who had said thank you to me for anything at all.

And you, at the bottom of a hole, with every reason to have stopped believing in me, asked me for a story.

And I want to be honest about what went through me, because it was not what it should have been.

What went through me was: *he still wants it*. Not *he still wants me* — I had stopped expecting that some months before, and it had been a relief, in the way that giving up on a thing is a relief. Just: the work is still wanted. Somebody down there still has a use for the only thing I can still do.

I have had a great deal of time since to be ashamed of how much that was worth to me, and I have decided not to be.

I sat down properly. I remember arranging myself, which is a ridiculous thing to do in a field.

And then I told you about the woman with the blue door.

IV. THE STONE

36.

I did not come for two days and I have never told you why.

The watch picked me up. There is a street on the west side where you are not supposed to ask, and I knew that, and I went into it anyway because it was the fourth day of getting nothing and I had run out of streets.

They kept me two nights in a room behind the grain office with three other people.

Nobody said whose daughter I was.

That is the part I want down. There were four men in that room over two nights and two of them knew exactly who I was — I had been at my father's shoulder at ceremonies, I was not a rumour — and neither of them said it, and neither of them let me out, and one of them gave me water.

They let me go on the third morning because the room was needed.

I ran the whole way. My feet were what they were by then and I ran anyway, and when I got to the rim I could not speak for a while, and you asked what had happened, and I said I had been unwell.

You did not ask again. You never asked twice about anything, and for most of that year I thought that was tact.

37.

Then a hundred camels came into the city.

You cannot imagine what that was in that town. Nothing had come in for a year but grain and soldiers. There was silk being unrolled in the street. There were carpets stacked to the height of a man. There was gold going past in daylight with two bored people walking beside it.

Everybody went. The whole town emptied into that quarter.

And I went too, in what I was in, with my feet, into a crowd of people who had been watching me beg at their doors for eleven months.

Because merchants come from somewhere.

38.

I got to the front and I asked him about Iran.

I asked whether Gudarz [goo-DARZ] was alive. I asked whether Giv [GEEV] was alive. I asked what the Shah knew, and I asked it in the street, out loud, in Turan, which if anybody had been listening properly would have finished me.

He said: get away from me. I know no Khosrow [khos-ROW] and no commander.

He said it hard, the way you would to a beggar you wanted gone, and everybody standing near us heard it and one of them laughed.

I did not go.

I want that on the record more than I want anything else in this book on the record. I had been told to go away by a great many people that year, and I had gone away every time, because that is what you do, and this once I did not.

I stood there in front of an enormous man in merchant's clothes who had just humiliated me for sport, and I kept talking, because he had come from somewhere and I had run out of everything else.

I told him there was a man in a pit outside the town. I told him whose son he was and whose grandson, because those are the words that move an Iranian and I knew it. I told him the chains and the collar and the stone and how long it had been. I said it fast, because I did not think I had long, and I said it in the street with people going past on both sides.

He did not look at me while I said it. He looked at a roll of cloth and turned it over and put it down. Anybody watching would have said a beggar was bothering a trader and the trader was waiting her out.

And after a while, without his face changing at all, he told a boy to have a bird roasted.

39.

I carried it back warm against my chest and it was the first warm thing I had held since the tent.

I did not look inside it. I want you to know that. There was something heavy in there and I felt it through the bread and I knew perfectly well it was not bone, and I did not look, because there were two men on that road behind me and I had spent a year learning what to do with my face.

I dropped it down and I sat back on my heels.

And then you laughed.

You have to understand what that was. Eleven months. Eleven months of putting food into a hole and hearing scraping, and never once being certain — not once, not on any single day of it — that there was a living man down there rather than an animal, or an echo, or the thing my own head had built to keep me company.

And out of the ground came a man laughing.

I put my hands over my face and I stayed like that for a while. Not because of the ring. I did not know about the ring. I found out about the ring afterwards, from you, shouting it up at me, and by then it did not matter.

Somebody was alive down there.

I had been right for eleven months and nobody had ever told me so.

from the old book

He came into the city as a merchant with a hundred camels of gold, and the great lord of that country met him on the road and liked him, and gave him a licence to trade and a house to keep his goods in. That lord was the one man in Turan who had ever saved the boy's life. He never found out. The poem lets him go on not knowing.

40.

That night I took eight men across open ground in the dark to a hole I could have walked to blind.

They were the best men in Iran. I have since had them named to me, twice, by people who assumed I would want to know.

Nobody spoke to me on the way out. Not unkindly — they were working. But I was the one who knew where it was, and I walked in front, and behind me were eight of the most important men in your country, and not one of them asked me anything at all.

Then they put their hands on the stone.

I had looked at that stone every day for eleven months. I had sat with my back against it. I had learned which side kept the sun off in the afternoon.

I watched seven of them fail at it. Twice. Then a third time with rope.

And I stood four paces away in the dark and thought — and I am not proud of this — *good*.

Not because I wanted you down there. Because for eleven months every person I met had looked at me as though I had chosen this, as though a woman with any sense would have walked away by now, and here were seven enormous men in armour finding out what the ground had been doing to me.

41.

Then the big one stopped, and put his hands on it differently, and said something that was not to us.

I did not hear the words. I heard the shape of them and it was not an instruction.

And then the stone moved.

I have thought about that more than anything else in this book and I have decided that I am not going to have an opinion about it. Seven men could not. He prayed, and then it went. I was there. I have nothing else to tell you.

The hole opened and the sky went down into it for the first time since the day my father took my shoes.

And you screamed.

Everybody there thought it was joy, or pain from the irons. I knew what it was before you were halfway up, because I had been at the top of that shaft in the dark on nights with a moon, and I knew how little of it got past the stone, and I had thought a hundred times: *when this ends, the first thing that happens to him will be light.*

42.

They put a rope down and a man went down after it, and I was made to stand back.

Not roughly. Somebody put an arm out, the way you do with a person who is in the way, and by the time the rope came up there were eight men and two horses between me and the hole.

I was about fifty paces off. I want that number in the book. Fifty paces, at the end of eleven months, for the one thing I had been waiting for.

I did not see you come up. I saw the men's backs and the way their heads went when they got a look at you.

I heard you say something before they got the collar off. One word or two. It came across that ground thin and it went into the noise of eight men talking and horses moving.

I thought it was my name.

I have had a long time to be honest about this and here is the honest version: I do not know what you said. I know I heard a sound. I know that in the moment I was certain it was my name, and I know that I was a woman who had not eaten properly in a year standing fifty paces from the only thing she cared about.

They told me afterwards what you had actually said. Somebody told me, kindly, on the second day of the road, thinking it was a good story.

It was a fine thing to have said. It was a better thing than my name.

I have never told anybody that I heard something else.

43.

They burned my father's house that night and I was not sorry and I am not going to pretend to be.

Then eleven days in a cart.

The Iranians were kind to me. I need to say that clearly because of what comes next and I do not want it read as bitterness. They gave me a blanket. They gave me the good side of the fire. A man called Rohham [roh-HAAM] cut up my food for four days without being asked and without saying anything about it, because my hands were not working, and I have never been able to thank him properly because I have never seen him since.

Not one of them knew my name.

They knew *the woman*. They knew *she is the one who fed him*. It was said with real warmth and it was said across me, over my head, while I was sitting there, for eleven days.

They asked me things. I want to be fair. On the third day one of them asked how I had known where the pit was, and I said I had lived there, and he laughed, and then he stopped laughing.

They talked about you constantly and always in the third person and always with me sitting there. *He was in a bad way when he came up. He will not eat. He asked after the horse*. Eleven days of hearing about a man I had spoken to every day for a year, described to me by strangers, as though I had just arrived.

Once — only once — one of them said, *she would know*, and turned to me. And I did know, and I told him, and he thanked me, and it was the best moment of the eleven days and I have thought about it more than I would like to admit.

And every night on that road you got a little further away.

Not coldness. You were never once cold to me and you are not cold to me now. It is that a man surrounded by his own people, being told he is a hero, being fed and washed and asked about his father, starts to become the person all those people are talking to. And I

had been the only person talking to you for a year, and now I was one of nine.

By the ninth day you were laughing at something a man called Gorazeh [go-raa-ZEH] said, and I was pleased for you, and it went through me like a nail.

from the old book

The poem ends the story by saying that the world gives out luxury and suffering by turns, and that a wise man does not hold on to either, and that what gives a noble heart peace is giving things away. It says this immediately after describing what the boy was given: silk, a crown, ten purses, a hundred horses, a hundred camels, and a house.

44.

The hall was full and everybody stood up.

They gave you Byzantine silk, which somebody had thought about and nobody had thought about enough. A crown. Ten purses of gold. A hundred horses, a hundred camels, men to look after them, and a house.

The Shah came down off the chair and put his hand on your shoulder and said it in front of everybody, in that voice he has, and everybody in that hall heard him say it:

Pass the world with her in gladness — and look well at how the days turn.

It is the kindest sentence anybody has ever said about me. I have not been able to put it down since.

I was at the back, in clothes a dead woman had left behind, and it was the first time in a year anybody had said the word *her* in a room with me in it.

Two more things happened in that hall and then I am finished.

The first is that a man near me said something about the Shah's mother — where she was born, some remark, nothing in it. And every person in that room went on with their evening.

I am her sister.

The man on that chair is my sister's son. I have his mother's chin. I could have stood up in that hall and said it and the whole shape of my life would have changed inside a minute.

I said nothing.

Because the moment I say it I am Afrasiyab [af-raa-see-YAAB]'s daughter in a room full of Iranians, and a piece of business, and a thing to be careful around. And I would rather be what I actually am, which is the woman who fed him, even if that is worth a blanket and the good side of a fire and no name.

That is the last thing I ever got to choose and I chose it, and I would choose it again.

The second thing is Golnar.

They had prisoners from the raid. One of them was a household man, and he was talking, the way people do when they are frightened and want to be useful, and he said — as a small thing, as filler — that the old nurse from the king's daughter's household had done well for herself. She has a place now. A house of her own on the east side.

In my uncle's gift.

And I sat at the back of that hall with the Shah's sentence still going round the room, and I did the arithmetic that I am going to do for the rest of my life.

I sent Golnar across the grass to ask how many men were with you. She was gone far longer than that takes. She came back without a number.

A guide who had ridden that road four times in thirty years knew that a king's daughter would be at that particular ground on those particular three days, unguarded, two days inside the border. He knew it well enough to build a lie on it and hand it to a boy who would go.

My father needed a reason to be seen being hard, and he was handed one, and he did not have to lift a finger to get it — he only had to ask me one quiet question in a small room, and I answered it myself, and I convicted myself with my own mouth to keep you alive, and he nodded once and went out and started shouting.

My uncle did this to Siyavash over about a year, with small remarks, at the right moments.

He did it to me in three days, and it cost him a nurse's wages.

And I cannot prove one word of it.

I have a woman who disappeared and turned up with a house. I have a question that never came back with an answer. I have an uncle who has done this before and who will ask after my health if he ever sees me again.

That is not evidence. I know exactly what it is. It is a shape, and I have spent my whole life in a house that taught me to see shapes and never to say them out loud.

There is nobody I can tell. My father is my father. My sister's son does not know I exist and I have just decided he never will. And you — you are across this room, in silk, being introduced to people, and you are looking for me, I can see you looking for me, and when you find me you will be very kind.

So here is the last list.

Not the house. Not the servants they have given me, or the money, or the household, or the man who is coming across the room now with his hand out.

One thing.

A needle, from a woman with a blue door who never once spoke to me, sewn into a hem I do not need to mend any more.

GLOSSARY

Afrasiyab af-raa-see-YAAB — King of Turan, and her father. He had his own son-in-law murdered on his brother's advice, and hunted his own grandson. He is at his most frightening when he is calm.

Bahram bah-RAAM — The man at the door of her father's palace. He has stood there since before she was born. He counts what goes in.

Bijan bee-ZHAN — An Iranian paladin. Son of Giv, grandson of Gudarz, of the line of Kashvad. The man at the treeline.

Forud fo-ROOD — Son of Siyavash by a Turanian mother. He held a fort on a mountain and he was seventeen. What Turan says about the Iranians when Turan wants to say something.

Garsivaz gar-SEE-vaz — Her uncle, her father's brother. He comes to dinner every week. He is the man who talked her father into murdering Siyavash.

Giv GEEV — Bijan's father, who once crossed into Turan alone and stayed seven years looking for another man's child.

Golnar gol-NAAR — Persian, pomegranate flower. Her nurse, who fed her as a baby and who is the only person in that house who tells her when she is being stupid.

Gorazeh go-raa-ZEH — One of the Iranians on the road home.

Gorgin gor-GEEN — An Iranian paladin, sent as a guide. He has known that road for thirty years.

Gudarz goo-DARZ — Bijan's grandfather, head of his house, who has buried seventy sons and grandsons.

Isfahan es-fa-HAAN — A city of the Gudarzian family's country.

Kay Khosrow kay khos-ROW — Shah of Iran. Son of Siyavash and of her own sister. He owns a cup that shows him the world.

Manijeh ma-nee-ZHEH — The narrator. Daughter of Afrasiyab.

Rohham roh-HAAM — One of the Iranians on the road home. He cut up her food for four days without being asked.

Siyavash see-yaa-VASH — An Iranian prince who proved his innocence by riding through fire, went into exile in Turan, married her sister, and was murdered there anyway. Everything in this book happens downstream of that.

Turan too-RAAN — Her country. The lands beyond the eastern river. Two days' ride from where the boars were.

A king's daughter is stripped of everything and given a hole in the ground as an address. Her father takes her rank, her women and her shoes, walks her out to the pit where he has put the Iranian, tells her this is her home now, and rides away.

So she begs. Door to door, all day, in a town where everyone knows who she used to be, and carries what she is given out to a hole she cannot reach into.

She does it for eleven months. She cannot see him. She cannot be sure the food lands. She cannot be certain, on any single day of it, that the voice answering her is still his.

The old book says she fed him and that he was rescued. The old book does not say what she was doing while she talked, or what she left out, or who knew where to find her that spring.

She was the hole they dropped him into before there was ever a hole.

