

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 74



زنگ تفریح

THE BREAK BELL

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE BREAK BELL

زنگ تفریح

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 74

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

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-73-5

Roya Publications

Publication No. 74

FROM THURSDAY NIGHTS

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

سال تحصیلی: ۱۴۰۶-۱۴۰۵

روستا: تنگ سرخ

نام آموزگار: دبستان تنگ سرخ

شماره	نام و نام خانوادگی دانش آموز	نمره فارسی (از ۲۰)	نمره ریاضی (از ۲۰)
۱	حامد رضایی	۱۷	۱۴
۲	علی مرادی	۱۸	۱۶
۳	رضا کریمی	۱۵	۱۲
۴	مجتبی احمدی	۲۰	۱۸
۵	مهدی حسینی	۱۶	۱۳
۶	حسن اکبری	۱۴	۱۵
۷	حسین نادری	۱۳	۱۱
۸	سعید رحیمی	۱۶	۱۷
۹	جواد محمدی	۱۱	۱۴
۱۰	فاطمه مرادی	۱۸	۱۹
۱۱	زهرا حسینی	۱۴	۱۲
۱۲	مریم رضایی	۱۵	۱۵
۱۳	نرگس احمدی	۱۳	۱۳
۱۴	معصومه کریمی	۱۶	۱۶
۱۵	لیلا نادری	۱۰	۱۱
۱۶	زینب رحیمی	۱۵	۱۴
۱۷	سارا اکبری	۱۹	۱۷
۱۸	حمید قاسمی	۱۳	۱۲
۱۹	وحید جعفری	۱۱	۱۵
۲۰	امیر رستمی	۱۷	۱۸
۲۱	بهرام صادقی	۱۴	۱۳
۲۲	داود حیدری	۱۲	۱۳
۲۳	پرویز نوروزی	۱۸	۱۶
۲۴	محمود شریفی	۹	۱۱
۲۵	اکبر یوسفی	۲۰	۱۹
۲۶	ناصر توکلی	۱۳	۱۴
۲۷	منصور عباسی	۱۲	۱۲
۲۸	اسماعیل قربانی	۱۵	۱۵
۲۹	یوسف رفیعی	۱۲	۱۰
۳۰	کاظم سلطانی	۱۶	۱۸
۳۱	احمد موسوی	۱۵	۱۶
۳۲	عباس زمانی	۱۲	۱۳
۳۳	فرهاد شمس	۱۷	۱۷
۳۴	ناهید مرادی	۱۱	۱۲
۳۵	رقیه حسینی	۱۳	۱۴
۳۶	کبری احمدی	۱۰	۱۱
۳۷	طیبه کریمی	۱۴	۱۵
۳۸	مهناز رضایی	۱۳	۱۳
۳۹	شتهلا نادری	۱۷	۱۴
۴۰	سیمین رحیمی	۱۲	۱۲

امضاء:

مهر و امضاء مدیر:



آموزگار: پرویز نوروزی
مهر و امضاء: پرویز نوروزی
تاریخ: ۱۳۹۹/۰۵/۰۵

SYNOPSIS

He goes to his daughter's celebration in a black turban, because the man she invited was the cleric who signed her paper and not the father who left, and in the fourth hour his wife looks at him across the room and knows him in four seconds.

She does not expose him. She counts him, for two hours, in front of witnesses, and walks him to the door and says: *Fine. Then you'll do something for me instead.*

He goes north-west because it is the only direction he has not used. In the second week of Azar the pass closes behind him, and it will not open until Farvardin, and for the first time since he was seventeen years old there is no door.

There is a village of two hundred people in the gorge, and a school with two rooms and forty children across six grades, and no teacher since Mehr. A man in the shop has been carrying the keys in his coat for eleven weeks and is tired of having them in his coat.

Nobody checks anything, because there is nothing on this side of the mountain to check with.

And he cannot read.

The Break Bell is the account he wrote afterwards, set down as forty numbered questions: the record of a man who could not open a book running a school built entirely on memorisation, and discovering that a teacher who cannot check the text has nothing left to do but listen to the child.

There is a retired schoolmaster of seventy-one who has been careful for forty-eight years about who comes into that village and what they write down about the people in it. There is a boy of eleven who runs the only functioning financial institution in the gorge out of the back of his mathematics book. There is a second teacher who worked out what he was in the second week and said nothing, for reasons entirely her own.

And there is a kerosene heater with a flue that does not pull.

THE STANDING

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

I was a burglar in Tehran for twenty-seven years, and I was caught once, and of the twelve years I was given I served four. I came out of a hospital in Mashhad 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 folded on top of it. It was black. Black means the Prophet's blood. I found that out on a bus.

I was the custodian of a shrine in a salt town for fourteen months, and I left there owing three debts I cannot pay and carrying one line out of a pilgrim register from 1357 that I have not been able to put down.

Then I was a doctor. I was not a doctor. There was a bag on a luggage rack and a village of four hundred people on a dying qanat who had been promised a locum eleven months earlier and had stopped expecting one, and I was there fourteen weeks, and a woman lived who would not have, and a boy of nine died who might not have, and I forged eleven months of a broken man's professional life in one night and walked out before it was light.

I have never once left anywhere because I decided to. The paperwork catches up and I move. That is not a decision, it is drainage.

I am forty-seven. I have no passport, no bank account and no papers in my own name, and I am wanted in three provinces under a name that is mine and two that are not.

There is a poem about thirty birds who went a long way to find a king. I have never read it. I have had pieces of it from a man at the top of a well who got it wrong, and I got it wrong worse when I passed it on, and there is a nightingale in it who will not go because he loves a flower.

I used to think that was the stupid bird.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Every Iranian alive has stood in the *saf* — the line — in a cold yard at ten past seven in the morning, and had their fingernails inspected, and waited for the bell.

And every Iranian alive knows the two words *zang-e tafrih*, the break bell, which is the twenty minutes the rest of the day is arranged around, and which is the warmest phrase in the language. Say it to a man of sixty and he will stop what he is doing and be nine years old with bread in his coat pocket.

I wanted to write about that yard, and about the sandwiches, which are the most brutally honest economic system this country has ever operated — a hierarchy with *kalbās* at the top and bread-and-something at the bottom, understood exactly by every child in it, discussed by none of them, and in which nobody shares, because a bite given today is a bite owed forever and there is no mechanism for settling it.

And I wanted to write about *hefz* — memorisation — which is the spine of the whole education and which puts a nine-year-old on his feet reciting forty lines of Ferdowsi at speed, perfectly, letter for letter, in a Persian a thousand years old, with no idea what any of it means. The word means to commit to memory. It also means to preserve, to guard, to keep safe. I have never heard anybody remark on this.

There is a joke buried in the arrangement, which is that a man who cannot read at all can run a memorisation lesson better than a man who can, because the one who can is listening for errors and the one who cannot has nothing left to do but listen to the child.

I have taken some care with the rest of it. Rural multi-grade classrooms in this country routinely hold five or six grades in one small room with one teacher. Something over forty per cent of classrooms have no adequate heating, and something like a hundred thousand still use kerosene heaters that have been formally banned for years, because the alternative to an illegal

heater is no heater. Children walk four kilometres. Very few of them own a bag.

A word on the smoke, because it is the third of these books to have one and I would like it understood that I have not gone looking.

Tātūreh is datura. It grows on waste ground all over Iran and it has been the village remedy for toothache for as long as there have been villages with no dentist: seeds on a coal, a cloth over the head, breathe. It works. It is not a substance and nobody calls it one; it sits in a twist of cloth on a shelf between the salt and the tea.

It is also a deliriant, which is a different animal from anything in the first two books. It does not make the walls move and it does not make you pleased. It puts ordinary people in the room, behaving exactly as they behave, with no moment anywhere in it in which any part of you suspects anything — and then it does not lay the memory down. Not hazily. Not at all.

I have wanted for a long time to write about the particular cruelty of being given an answer by an instrument that does not retain, and I do not think I would have found it anywhere except in a country where the cure for a tooth is a weed.

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

Chew Z

CONTENTS

PART ONE — THE PASS

1. What does a man wear to his own daughter's celebration?	15
2. How long does it take to be recognised by somebody who was married to you?	16
3. What did she say at the door?	18
4. Which direction have I not used?	19
5. How long does a pass stay open in Azar?	21
6. How many weeks has this man been carrying these keys?	23
7. What do you do when you cannot read the register?	25
8. Where is the treasure buried?	26

PART TWO — THE LINE

9. Are these nails acceptable?	30
10. Can a man who cannot read run a memorisation lesson?	31
11. What is a fraction?	33
12. What is in that sandwich, and what does it cost?	34
13. Why has nobody hit my son?	35
14. What is this man's business model?	37
15. Read that word for me, Aqa.	38
16. How many times can a transfer be refused?	40
17. How cold is a hole in a wall stuffed with rag?	42

PART THREE — THE BREAK BELL

18. Whose stamp is this?	45
19. Who is looking at whose paper?	47
20. Why did I let them?	48
21. What were you doing in the winter of the revolution?	50
22. How many columns?	51
23. What goes in the fourth?	52
24. And what did they do with the ones they kept?	54
25. How does an owl justify a life?	56
26. Who corrected me?	57

PART FOUR — THE SMOKE

27. What use am I to you?	61
28. When does the road open?	63
29. What did your mother do for a tooth?	64
30. Who is sitting in the room?	66
31. What did she say?	67
32. Why does this man write everything down?	68
33. How many is eleven?	69
34.	71

PART FIVE — TWENTY

35. What is the mark for a paper that is wrong?	74
36. Eleven weeks.	75
37. What did you write down?	77
38. Where will you go?	78
39. Four men.	79
40. And what does that name mean to you?	81

PART ONE — THE PASS

Questions One to Eight

1.

What does a man wear to his own daughter's celebration?

In Shurabad I wrote you lessons, which I was not qualified to give.
In the clinic I wrote you notes, which I was not qualified to take.

These are questions. It is the first honest heading I have managed in three attempts and it took me until forty-seven.

The celebration was in a hall off Sattarkhan on the fourth of Bahman, and it was not a wedding — the wedding had been in Ordibehesht and I had certified in my own hand that her father could not be found. This was the thing her husband's family do afterwards, eight or nine months on, which as far as I could establish exists so that the people who could not be at the wedding can be somewhere.

I went in the coat.

I want to deal with that immediately because it is the worst decision in this book and everything that follows is downstream of it, and I have had twenty years and I still do not have a defence, only an explanation, and the explanation is worse than no defence.

She invited *Sayyid Vahedi*. *That is who she rang. That is the man she wanted in the room, and she said why on the telephone at the side of a road:* you're the only person who ever gave me an answer about him that I could use.

If I had gone in a suit I would have been a stranger at a party.

In the coat I was the only person there who knew what she was.

So I stood at the edge of a rented hall in the north-west of Tehran with a black turban on my head, at my daughter's celebration, being introduced to my son-in-law's mother, and I was greeted with enormous and entirely genuine respect by about forty people, and I ate very good rice, and I was asked twice to say a few words and declined both times, which by then I understood to be more impressive than saying them.

Golnar was extremely happy. That is not a small thing and I am not going to make it one. She had got her paper through a court, and she had got married, and she was twenty and she was standing in a

hall in a green dress being pleased with herself, and she came over three separate times to check that I had eaten.

The third time she said, "You came all this way."

I said it was nothing.

She said, "It isn't nothing. Nobody comes all that way."

Farid seems to be a decent man. He has a good handshake and he laughed at the correct places and he talked to me about the price of tractor parts for eleven minutes with real feeling, and I have thought about him with a kind of low continuous gratitude ever since.

I was there four hours.

And in the fourth hour, from the doorway of the kitchen, holding a tray, my wife looked at me.

2.

How long does it take to be recognised by somebody who was married to you?

Four seconds.

I have been across rooms from police. I have been across a room from Sarhang Zaker, who had a theory about me and eight years to prove it. I have stood in front of a judge in Mashhad [mash-HAD] and been told what I was.

None of that is being looked at by a woman you were married to for seven years.

Mahnaz [mah-NAAZ] is not clever in the way that people mean when they say clever. She has never read a difficult book and has no interest in one. What she has — what she had at twenty-four and has now — is that she does not require a thing to make sense before she believes it. Most people cannot see what is in front of them because it has not been introduced. She has no such requirement.

She looked at a sayyid in a black turban standing by a window at her daughter's celebration, and she did not think *that man*

resembles Nader, and she did not think *it cannot be*, and she did not spend eleven seconds arguing with the evidence the way any reasonable person would.

She thought: *there he is*.

And then she picked up the tray and came over and gave me tea.

I want to describe the next two hours accurately, because they were the most sustained piece of work anybody has ever done to me and she did it with her hands full.

She called me *Haj Aqa* [haaj AA-ghaa] twice, in front of other people, with a small full stop after it.

I have heard that full stop before. A woman on her knees washing a floor at five in the morning in a salt town used to put it there, and I knew exactly what it meant when she did it, and I have never once in my life been on the receiving end of it from somebody who was not being kind.

Mahnaz was not being kind.

She asked me, in front of Farid's mother, how long I had been at the shrine.

I said fourteen months.

She said, "And before that?"

I said I had been in Mashhad.

And she said, "Of course. Everybody's in Mashhad," and turned to Farid's mother and said something about the rice, and Farid's mother laughed, and that was the whole exchange, and I stood there with my ears going.

She did it four more times over two hours. She never once asked me anything I could not answer. She asked me only things I could answer, and then took the answer, and looked at it, and put it down, in front of witnesses, the way you put down a coin you suspect.

Nobody in that hall noticed anything. Golnar noticed nothing. Farid noticed nothing.

And I understood, somewhere in the second hour, that she was not exposing me and had no intention of exposing me, and that if she had wanted to do that she could have done it in the first four seconds with one sentence and a tray in her hands.

She was *counting*. She was establishing what I was, and how much of it there was, and what condition it was in.

I have done that. I have stood in a stairwell for four hours doing exactly that.

I had never once been on the other end.

3.

What did she say at the door?

She walked me out at about eleven.

That is normal. Somebody always walks you out; it would have been strange if nobody had. She took my coat off the hook and handed it to me and came into the corridor and down the stairs and out into the cold, and neither of us said one word for the whole of it.

At the bottom she said:

“She doesn’t know.”

I said no.

“And you’re not going to tell her.”

I said no.

She nodded once, the way you do at a tradesman who has confirmed a price.

Then she said the sentence.

“Fine. Then you’ll do something for me instead.”

Not a request. Not a threat either — that is the part I have never been able to explain to anybody. There was no heat in it whatsoever. She did not accuse me of anything, she did not ask me where I had been for six years, she did not mention Vakilabad [va-keel-aa-BAAD] or my mother’s funeral or any of the eleven things she was entitled to open with.

She had spent two hours doing an inventory of an asset, and at the end of it she had arrived at the only reasonable conclusion available to a practical woman, which is that a man who can walk into a room full of people wearing a black turban and be believed is not a disaster.

He is a *capability*.

She said, "Not now. I'll tell you when."

And she asked for my number and I gave it to her.

I gave it to her. I want that on the record, because everything Mahnaz did in the next four years she did with a telephone number I handed over voluntarily on a step in Sattarkhan at eleven at night for no reason that I have ever been able to name.

Then she said, "You look old," and went back inside.

I was on a bus north-west before six.

4.

Which direction have I not used?

I want to explain the travelling, because you are going to ask, and because I did not understand it myself until the middle of this book and I would like you to have it earlier than I did.

The official reason is the fourth column. A name — or a thing I had assumed was a name — beside my mother's in a pilgrim register in a place I can never enter again, and a correction delivered to me ninety feet under a desert by a colleague in a bad mood, and eleven days of asking in tea houses, badly, in four towns.

That is what I say. That is what I said to myself for two years and it is true and it is not the reason.

The structural reason is that I am an escaped prisoner and every place I stop has a filing cabinet in it. I have never in my life left anywhere because I decided to. In the salt town I packed a bag and got to the top of the road and a bus opened its door and asked me if I was coming and I said no. In the clinic I left on a Sunday because a brown envelope with a window in it had arrived on a Tuesday.

The paperwork catches up and I move. That is not a decision, it is drainage.

And the true reason I did not have words for until a woman in a school corridor said something to me in Bahman, and it is this.

Eleven weeks.

I have told you about the eleven weeks. It was in the first book and I put it there as a piece of professional observation about women, and I was rather pleased with myself about it: that I could be an extraordinarily good man — attentive, accurate, present, on time — for somewhere between six and eleven weeks, and then the lamp went off, and what was left behind was a man who could not remember why he had asked about the sister.

Eleven weeks is how long you can watch a person before you have to know them.

I have been doing that to *towns*.

Shurabad got fourteen months and Ab-Bidar got fourteen weeks, and I thought the difference between those numbers and eleven meant something. It meant nothing at all. What happened in both cases is that the eleven weeks ran out and I stayed anyway, because a place cannot walk away from you, and being unable to leave and being unable to be known are not the same problem, and I had been treating them as the same problem since 1997.

So: north-west, because it was the only direction I had not used.

That is the whole of my strategy for the winter of 1405. Not a lead, not a name, not a plan. A man of forty-seven on a bus, choosing a compass point on the grounds that he had not spoiled it yet.

There is a road that goes up out of the plain into the mountains and it has a gorge in it about two-thirds of the way along, and the gorge is called Tang-e Sorkh [TAN-ge SORKH], the red narrows, and there is a village in it of about two hundred people.

I got there in the second week of Azar [aa-ZAR] on the back of a pickup with three sacks of onions and a man who wanted to talk about the exchange rate, which is the national conversation and always has been.

He told me what a dollar was that week. Then he told me what it had been when he bought the pickup. Then, without any change of tone at all, he told me what his daughter's tuition would be next year in dollars that he will never in his life hold, and what that was in onions.

That is how it is done here. Nobody says a word about politics. They tell you the price of a thing, and then the price of the same thing eleven years ago, and then they look at you, and the entire argument has been made and no one has said anything that could be written down.

I asked him how long the road stayed open.

He said, "Depends."

I asked what it depended on.

And he said, "On whether you're the sort of man who gets stuck," which I took at the time for a joke.

5.

How long does a pass stay open in Azar?

The road closed on the eleventh day.

I would like to say that I looked at the sky and made an assessment, and that a man with my training reads weather the way he reads a stairwell. I did not. It snowed for two days, which is nothing, and then it snowed for four more, and on the seventh morning a man came down from the upper houses and said the pass had gone at the shoulder, and everybody nodded, and somebody put more water in the samovar.

Nobody was upset. That is the thing I could not get over for about a fortnight. Two hundred people in a gorge had just been sealed into it until Farvardin [far-var-DEEN] and the general mood was mild inconvenience, of the kind you would show about a delayed bus.

I asked how long.

A woman said, "Esfand [es-FAND]. Maybe the middle."

I said, "And if somebody is ill?"

And she said, "Then they are ill in the village," and offered me more tea.

Now.

I have spent my life arranging to be able to leave rooms. That is not a metaphor and it is not psychology; it is a trade requirement. You do not go into a building you cannot come out of. In twenty-seven years I never once entered a flat without knowing the two ways out, and eleven of those years I did not need to and I did it anyway, and in Vakilabad I had ruled out ten of the eleven exits by my second winter.

And I stood in a gorge in Azar with a beard I had grown for other reasons and a coat I had stolen off a chair in Mashhad, and I understood that for the first time since I was seventeen years old there was no door.

Not a locked door. *No door*. The distinction is enormous and I recommend it to nobody.

For four days I was in a condition I have never been in before or since and can only describe as a kind of slow-motion drowning conducted at room temperature. I could not sit down. I walked the length of that village eleven times a day. I looked at the shoulder of the pass through a gap in the houses about forty times, which is exactly as useful as it sounds.

And on the fifth day something in me simply stopped, the way an engine stops, and I sat down on a wall and was perfectly all right, and I have never been able to work out whether that was courage arriving or hope leaving, and I am inclined to think they are the same event described by two kinds of people.

I had ninety thousand tomans, a stolen identity card belonging to a doctor, no papers in my own name, and a tooth that had started, very faintly, at the back on the left.

I remember noticing the tooth on that wall and thinking: *well, that will keep*.

6.

How many weeks has this man been carrying these keys?

I got work the way you always get work in a village, which is by being visible in the shop for three days.

There is a shop. There is always a shop. This one had a paraffin smell and a shelf of tinned things with the prices written on in marker pen and crossed out twice, which is the entire economic history of this country on one label, and it had a bench outside that nobody sat on in Azar and a bench inside that everybody did.

On the third day a man called Asghar came in, looked at me, and said, "Can you read?"

I said yes.

That is the second-worst decision in this book.

He put a bunch of keys on the counter — four keys on a wire ring, with a paper tag gone soft — and he said, "The school."

I said I was not a teacher.

And he said, and I want you to have this exactly as he said it, because eleven other things in this book grow out of it:

"There isn't one. There hasn't been one since Mehr. There won't be one till Farvardin at the earliest and probably not then, and the last three didn't come, and I've had these in my coat for eleven weeks and I am tired of having them in my coat."

I said, "Somebody must have to approve it."

He looked at me for a second.

Then he said, "Who?"

I want to unpack that, because everybody who hears this story assumes a document was forged. Nothing was forged. Nothing was even claimed. There was no approval to obtain because there was no one on this side of the pass empowered to give or withhold it, and the education office in the town is four hours away in good weather and there was no good weather and would not be for three months.

The village had a building, forty children, no teacher, and a man in the shop who said he could read.

I took the keys.

The school. Two rooms. Grades one to three in the small one, four to six in the large one. A yard with a flagpole and a water tap that froze. A store with eleven broken chairs in it and a box of chalk. A blackboard that had been painted over so many times the wood had gone slightly convex, so that a straight line drawn across it came out with a bend in the middle, and every child in that village grew up believing that this was a property of straight lines.

Forty children. Six grades. One of me.

And boys and girls in the same two rooms, which is not permitted and has been the arrangement in Tang-e Sorkh since 1348, because two hundred people cannot produce two of anything. Split forty children by grade and you have six groups. Split them by grade and by sex and you have twelve, and there is one building with two rooms in it and there had been no teacher since Mehr.

Nobody in that village has ever mentioned it to anybody, for the same reason nobody mentions the stove.

I sat in that cold room on the Thursday afternoon with the keys in my hand and did the only thing I know how to do under pressure, which is inventory.

I had: no qualification, no documents, no knowledge of any subject taught in an Iranian primary school, and a functional reading age that I would put, honestly, at about grade three. I can read a price. I can read a name. I can read a form if I am given time and nobody is watching me do it. I cannot read a page of continuous Persian aloud, at speed, in front of forty children, and I certainly cannot read the poetry, which is in every reader in this country from the first year, and which is not in the language people speak.

I had one thing.

I had my mother's trick, which is the only inheritance in this entire account: read the room in four seconds, listen like it is a trade, remember the names of people's sisters.

And I sat there and worked out, over about two hours, in the dark, that a school is a room.

7.

What do you do when you cannot read the register?

The register was on the desk.

It is a hardback book with the year printed on the front and forty ruled lines inside, and on each line there is a name written in the hand of the teacher who left in Mehr, and I opened it on the Saturday morning with thirty-nine children in front of me — one was ill — and I looked at forty names in somebody else's handwriting and could not have read six of them at gunpoint.

Persian handwriting is a language of its own. I want that understood by anyone who has not tried it. Printed Persian is one thing; a tired teacher's hand at four in the afternoon in a cold room is another, and the vowels are not there, and the difference between two names can be a dot.

So I closed it.

I closed the register and put it on the corner of the desk, and I said:

"I am not going to read your names. You are going to tell me your names, one at a time, standing up, and you are going to tell me one thing about yourself that is true. Not something good. Something true."

Thirty-nine children looked at me.

I would like to report that this was a pedagogical decision. It was terror with a straight face, which is the only technique I have ever had, and which has now got me through a mosque, a clinic and a school.

It took ninety minutes.

Reza, and my brother has a motorcycle.

Fatemeh, and I have been to Tabriz.

Mahdi, and I don't like the small room.

Zahra, and I can whistle.

And she whistled, and thirty-eight children fell over, and I lost the room for four minutes and got it back by waiting, which is the only move I own.

By the end of it I had thirty-nine names, in order, in my head, where they have remained. I could give you the whole list now. I could give you the whole list in twenty years.

And I had thirty-nine facts, and by the following Thursday I had used every one of them, out loud, to the child it belonged to — *Zahra, whistle at the end, we've earned it* — and that is the entire content of what I did in that village for four months.

It was around the houses by the evening meal.

I found out later, from Roshanak, what the village actually said about it, and it was not what I expected and I have never entirely recovered from it.

They did not say *the new teacher is unusual*.

They said: *nobody has ever known all of them before*.

Forty children, six grades, one room, a teacher every year or two who arrives from somewhere and leaves for somewhere, and in the history of that school, which goes back to 1348, no adult had ever held all forty names at once.

I did it because I could not read.

I have thought about that a great deal and it does not resolve. It sits in the same drawer as a woman in a corridor with a glass of water and a boy in the back of a pickup, and the drawer is now so full that I have stopped calling it a drawer.

8.

Where is the treasure buried?

Rahmat Sepehri [rah-MAT se-PEH-ree] came to inspect me on the ninth day and did not like me, and I want to record that he was entirely correct not to and that it took me until the end to earn any part of what he eventually gave.

Seventy-one. Forty years in that building, from 1355 to 1395, which is to say he taught in that room under two systems, through a revolution and a war, and half the adults in Tang-e Sorkh had sat in front of him and the other half were their children.

He came in during the second lesson, sat at the back, and stayed for two hours without saying a word.

I did what I do. I got through it. I had a grade-four boy read a page aloud and asked him what he thought it meant, and he said something quite good, and I said so.

Afterwards Rahmat stood by the bokhari [bo-khaa-REE] with his hat still on and said:

"You did not tell him what it means."

I said I had wanted to hear what he thought first.

"He is nine," said Rahmat. "What he thinks is that his uncle has a lorry."

I said that was still more than I had come in with.

And he looked at me for a while.

Then he said the thing, and he said it flatly, as a piece of information, on his way out, and I heard it as a compliment and filed it as a compliment and it was not a compliment and I did not understand what it was for four months:

"You have nothing in you. That is why they can hear themselves."

I said thank you.

He stopped in the doorway. He said, "That was not praise," and went out into the snow.

Now, the second part, which he did not say and which I have assembled since.

The reason Rahmat Sepehri came to inspect me on the ninth day is not that he was protective of his school, although he was. It is that he had spent forty-eight years being extremely careful about who came into that village and what they wrote down about the people in it, and a stranger who arrives in Azar and is handed the keys to a

building full of children is a thing that a certain kind of old man notices.

He came to find out what I was collecting.

I had a black turban in a bag under a bed and a stolen doctor's card in my coat and the name of a dead cleric in my head, and I was, in the only sense that mattered to him, exactly what he thought I was — a man who had come into a village under a false description in order to find something out.

He was seventy-one years old and he was the only person in that gorge who had ever done the same job, and he had done it in the winter of 1357, with a notebook, at the age of twenty-two.

It took him four months to decide about me and he was right to take four months.

PART TWO — THE LINE

Questions Nine to Seventeen

9.

Are these nails acceptable?

Every school day in this country begins with the *saf* [SAF], which means the line, and also a rank, and also a battle line, and every Iranian alive has stood in one.

You go out into the yard in the cold before the first bell and you form up in rows by grade, smallest at the front, and there is the anthem, and there are announcements, and then there is *nazm* — order — which is an inspection.

Fingernails. Hair. Collar. Shoes if there are shoes.

I ran the *saf* for four months. Forty children in a yard in a gorge in Azar at ten past seven in the morning, in snow, with my hands behind my back, walking down a row of nine-year-olds examining their fingernails.

I would like to say something about this because it is the funniest thing that has ever happened to me and I could not laugh at the time.

I was, at that moment, wanted in three provinces. I had gone through six hundred windows. I had four years of Vakilabad behind me and a stolen doctor's card in my coat and a black turban in a bag under a bed.

And I was bending down in the snow to tell Mahdi Rezaei, aged nine, that his nails were a disgrace to his mother.

He said they were not.

I said they were.

He said his brother's were worse.

I said his brother was not in this line.

He said his brother should be in this line.

This went on for some time and I want to record that I lost. I lost a negotiation with a nine-year-old in a yard, in public, in front of thirty-nine witnesses, and the terms of my defeat were that I would

inspect his brother's nails at the shop on Thursday, which I subsequently did, and they were worse.

Here is the professional observation, and it is not a joke.

The saf is a costume. That is all it is. Four hundred million people have stood in one and every single one of them understood, at some level, that the anthem and the nails and the rows by height are not about hygiene or patriotism, they are about a room agreeing that this is now school and not the walk here.

It is exactly, precisely the same instrument as eleven seconds of silence on a minbar and a needle in an upper outer quadrant.

I have now found it in three professions in three provinces and I have stopped being surprised. I have started to suspect that there is only one job in the world and that every institution is a different set of clothes for it.

10.

Can a man who cannot read run a memorisation lesson?

He can, and he can run it brilliantly, and the fact that this is true is either the funniest thing about the Iranian education system or the saddest, and I have never been able to get it to sit on one side.

Iranian primary school is built on *hefz* [HEFZ] — memorisation. The word means to commit to memory. It also means to preserve, to guard, to keep safe. Nobody has ever remarked on this in my hearing.

A child in this country memorises: short suras of the Quran, in Arabic, of which they can translate perhaps four words; the anthem; and poetry — Saadi, Hafez, Ferdowsi, Parvin Etesami — in a Persian four hundred to a thousand years old, which is not the language anybody in that room speaks.

They learn it perfectly. Letter for letter. At speed. Standing, hands at their sides, eyes on the middle distance.

And they do not know what it means, and it is not, in the main, explained.

Now consider the position of a fraud.

The child recites. The teacher listens. The teacher says *again* or *slower* or *from the third line*. The teacher is not required to produce one word of text, because the entire performance is the child's.

I did not have to read anything.

I had eleven years of school Arabic myself, which is to say none, and a functional reading age of about grade three, and I ran the finest hefz lessons that school had ever seen, and I want to explain why, because the reason is not funny.

Every other teacher those children had ever had was listening for *errors*.

I was listening for the child.

I could not check the text. I had no text. So what I did, having nothing else, was listen to a nine-year-old say forty lines of Ferdowsi and pay complete attention to it in the way I used to pay attention to a building — where they hurried, where they went flat, which line they leaned on, where the breath went wrong.

And then I would say: *do the fourth line again*.

And they would do it, and it would be better, and neither of us could have told you what the fourth line meant.

I was regarded within a month as unusually demanding. Parents said so approvingly in the shop. One woman told me her son had been made to do a line eleven times and had come home and done it eleven more on his own.

I was not being demanding. I was being *unable*, and the two are indistinguishable from the outside, which is a sentence I could put on my headstone.

The one that undid me was a girl in grade six called Setareh who came to me after and asked what a line meant.

It was Saadi. She said the line and asked me what it meant.

I said, "What do you think it means?"

She thought about it for a while and told me, and she was wrong — I know now that she was wrong, because I had it explained to me

four years later by a man in a bus station — and what she said was better than what it means.

And I said, “Yes.”

That is the worst thing I did in that school and nobody will ever be able to point at it.

11.

What is a fraction?

I learned grade six mathematics at night, in a cold room, at the age of forty-seven, out of a textbook, in about nine weeks.

Not the reading. The mathematics. I want to be clear that these are entirely different faculties and that mine are wildly unequal.

Because here is the thing nobody tells you about a man like me: I am extremely good with numbers. I have to be. Twenty-seven years of estimating what is in a room, what it weighs, what it is worth, how long a family stays at somebody’s mother’s house, how many seconds a stairwell gives you. I counted six hundred doors and eighty apologies and I have never once been wrong about a number in my life.

I had simply never been shown that this was a subject.

I opened a grade six textbook on the fourth night with the intention of getting through the following morning, and I found in it a section on ratio, and I sat in a cold room in a gorge and did every exercise on the page in about twenty minutes, and got them all right, and then sat looking at the wall for a long time.

Because I could have done that at eleven.

I did not go to school after fourteen. There were reasons and most of them were my father’s and I am not going to relitigate them here. But I sat in that room at forty-seven with a child’s book open in front of me and understood, with total clarity and no self-pity whatsoever, that I had been fitted for something and nobody had ever opened the box.

That is not a tragedy. Half the country is that. My mother could not read and could read a room in four seconds and was the most

intelligent person I have ever met, and she died having never been asked a single question by anybody about anything except what was for dinner.

I taught fractions for four months and I taught them well and Rahmat told me so, once, grudgingly, which from him was a decoration.

And I could not read the word *fraction*.

12.

What is in that sandwich, and what does it cost?

Zang-e tafrih [ZAN-ge taf-REEH]. The break bell. Twenty minutes.

There is no phrase in this language that does more work on a person. Say it to any Iranian of any age in any country and they will stop what they are doing and be nine years old in a cold yard. It means recreation, amusement, diversion — *tafrihi* is the word for a thing done for fun rather than seriously — and it is the twenty minutes that the entire remainder of the day is arranged around.

And what happens in it, principally, is the sandwiches.

I read the household income of that entire village in one break on my second day, and I was more accurate than the census, and it took me about six minutes.

There is a hierarchy. Every child knows their exact position in it to within one place, and no adult has ever discussed it with them, and it is completely stable.

At the top: *kalbās* [kal-BAAS]. Bologna, bought in a shop in the town, in bread. It means a family with cash and a vehicle or a relative with one. In Tang-e Sorkh that winter, three children.

Then egg. Then bread and cheese with walnut. Then bread and cheese. Then bread and butter and jam.

At the bottom: bread, and something in it that is not discussed.

And they do not share.

I want to be precise about this because outsiders always misread it as meanness and it is not meanness, it is arithmetic, and children

are the last honest economists alive. A bite given today is a bite owed forever. There is no mechanism for settling it. Nobody is going to let you into a debt you cannot clear.

So they eat facing very slightly away from each other, in a yard, twenty minutes, four months.

I watched it for two days and then I did something, and I have gone back and forth on whether it was the right thing for twenty years.

I put a pot on the bokhari.

Just a pot. Water, and whatever the shop had, and I made it look like it was for me and that they were welcome to it because I could not finish it, which is the only structure in which nobody owes anybody anything. Some days it was almost nothing. Twice it was very good.

I did not announce it and I did not do it every day, because a thing that happens every day becomes a thing you are owed, and a thing you are owed can be taken away from you, and I was going to leave in Farvardin.

The three with the kalbās still ate the kalbās. Nothing was equalised. Nobody was rescued.

But for about eleven weeks there was a pot on the stove and nine or ten children a day ate something hot that was not on anybody's ledger, and when I think about what I actually did in that village — not the heater, not the register, not the forty names — it is the pot.

13.

Why has nobody hit my son?

In the third week a man walked into my classroom during a lesson and complained, at some length, that I had not beaten his son.

Tanbih [tan-BEEH]. Punishment. The ruler across the palm, the ear, standing at the back. It has been officially forbidden in schools in this country for longer than I have been alive and it is entirely universal, and everybody involved knows both of those facts and holds them without difficulty.

His position, delivered in front of thirty-nine children, was:

The boy was lazy. The boy had always been lazy. Rahmat had beaten the boy's older brother and the older brother is now in Karaj [ka-RAJ] with a job. The new teacher does not beat anybody. Therefore the new teacher does not care whether the boy amounts to anything, and by not beating him is in fact insulting the family, because you do not bother to correct what you have written off.

I want you to sit with the internal logic of that, because it is airtight and it is not stupid and it is offered in complete good faith by a man who loves his son.

I did the only thing I know.

I let him finish. Then I let the silence go on for eleven seconds, which is a geological era, and which I have now used in a mosque, a clinic and a school and which has never once failed me.

Then I asked him what his son was good at.

He said, "Nothing."

And I said, "He can do sums in his head faster than I can do them on paper. Which I have to do, in front of him, every day, and he waits."

Which was true. It was true of Hamed, and I will come to Hamed, but it happened to be true of this boy as well.

The father stood there.

Then he said, "That is not the same as being good at school."

And I said, "No. It is better and it is worth less. Both of us know that. I am not going to hit him."

He went away extremely dissatisfied and told several people that the new teacher was soft.

Four days later he sent me down a bag of dried mulberries with no message attached, which in this country is a document.

14.

What is this man's business model?

Hamed [haa-MED] was eleven and in grade five and he was, without any qualification, the most capable person in that building including the adults.

He ran the yard.

I mean that literally and I mean it as a compliment of the highest order I am able to pay. Twice a month his uncle drove into the town, and Hamed went with him, and Hamed came back with sunflower seeds in a bag and gum and occasionally, in a good month, those very small chocolate wafers that come eleven to a box.

And he sold them in the yard at a markup.

Not much of one. He is not a shark. He had worked out — at eleven, without anybody explaining it — that a monopolist in a village of two hundred does not maximise per unit, he maximises the number of children who can afford to come back tomorrow.

And because nobody in that school had money, he ran *credit*.

There is a ledger. I have seen it. It is in the back of his mathematics exercise book, upside down, so that if the book is opened normally you see fractions. Thirty-one names, columns, dates, running balances, and a small mark against the ones he had decided informally to write off, which he never mentioned to those children and which I only understood because I have read a lot of ledgers upside down.

He was eleven years old and he was operating the only functioning financial institution in Tang-e Sorkh, with a credit assessment function and a bad-debt provision.

I bought seeds off him in the second week.

He charged me teacher price, which was double.

I want to describe what happened next with some care because it is the moment the whole book turns, although neither of us knew it.

I haggled.

Nobody had ever haggled with him. Adults do one of two things with a child selling something: they refuse, in which case the child is a nuisance, or they pay whatever is asked and add something, in which case the child is a charity. Nobody had ever treated the transaction as a transaction.

I told him the price was insulting. He said the price was the price. I said I could see the bag and there were fewer in it than last week. He said the bag was standard. I said the bag was standard and the filling was not, and that I had spent time in places where a man could be hurt for that.

He laughed so hard he had to put the bag down.

Then he came back at me with the freight cost, the uncle's petrol, and — this is the part that finished me — the fact that I was a *new customer with no history*, and that new customers pay more everywhere.

We settled at one and a half.

And from that day until the day he left that school he was on me like weather. Waiting at the gate. Carrying things. Volunteering for jobs nobody wanted so that he could be in the room. Asking questions during the break, which no child does.

I have been liked before, professionally, by women, for six to eleven weeks at a time, and I have never in my life been liked like that, and I had no procedure for it whatsoever.

15.

Read that word for me, Aqa.

He worked out something was wrong with me in about three days. Not what — he was eleven. But that this teacher was *different in a specific direction*, and the evidence he had assembled was very good.

I never picked up a book.

Every other teacher in the history of that school stood at the front with the reader open in one hand. I did not open one, not once, in

front of them. I got children to read. I got children to explain. I asked, and waited, and said *again*.

And a boy who runs a credit ledger notices when a man never looks at the page.

So he started testing me, and he did it the way I would have done it, which is what took me apart.

Nothing direct. Never a challenge. He would bring me a word.

"Aqa, what's this one?" — holding up his book, finger under a word, in the break, with nobody around.

And I would look at it for slightly too long and then say, "Sound it out."

And he would sound it out.

"Aqa, is this a *sin* or a *shin*?"

"What do you think?"

"I think it's a shin."

"Then it's a shin."

He did this perhaps eleven times over a fortnight, and every single time I routed around it, and every single time he went away satisfied and came back with a better one.

I knew exactly what he was doing. I knew because I invented that technique at seventeen years old on landings, which is that you never ask the question you want answered, you ask a smaller question and watch the hands.

And here is what I did about it, which is the only genuinely good decision I made in that village.

Nothing.

I did not shut it down. I did not intimidate him, which would have been easy and would have worked, and I did not confide in him, which would have been unforgivable — you do not put a thing like that in an eleven-year-old and call it friendship.

I let him keep testing me and I kept routing around it, and it became, without either of us ever acknowledging it, a game with rules.

In the ninth week he brought me a word and I said "sound it out" and he said, "You always say that," and looked at me.

And I said, "I know."

And he grinned like a wolf and went away and never brought me another word as long as I knew him.

He had his answer. He did not want it confirmed. He wanted, I think, to have something on the only adult who had ever taken him seriously, and to never once use it, which is the most sophisticated form of affection I have encountered.

16.

How many times can a transfer be refused?

Roshanak [ro-sha-NAK] had grades one to three in the small room, and she had been in Tang-e Sorkh four years, and she had applied for a transfer four times.

Her name means little light. She pointed out to me in about our third conversation that the village had electricity for perhaps nine hours a day in Dey [DEY] and that this was the funniest thing anybody had ever done to her, and I understood immediately that we were going to get on.

She was thirty-four. She was from Zanjan. She had a teaching qualification, which is one more than the rest of the building had between us, and she had come here because a rural posting is what you take when there is nothing else and you have a family to send money to, and she had been extremely good at it for four years while sending four applications into a system that answered none of them.

She knew I could not read by the second week.

She told me so in Esfand, sitting on the step in the sun with her hands round a glass.

I asked how.

She said, "Emlā [em-LAA]."

Dictation. The lesson where the teacher reads a passage aloud and the children write it and it is marked out of twenty and a misplaced letter costs half a mark. It is the spine of Persian primary education and it is unavoidable and I had, in four months, not done one.

I had run every other lesson. I had run hefz and mathematics and religion and I had run a nature lesson about snow that people still mention. I had not done a single emlā, and I had constructed, over four months, eleven separate excuses for it, and she had watched me construct every one of them and had said nothing.

I asked her why she had said nothing.

And she gave me the answer, and it is the reason I like her and the reason I have never once thought worse of her, because she did not dress it up for one second:

"Because a school with two teachers has a case. A school with one teacher has a problem." She turned the glass. "If I report you, they close the big room, and the forty become sixty in my room, and my transfer will not be looked at for another four years, because they cannot move the only teacher in a village."

I said, "So I'm your case."

"You're my case." She turned the glass. "And before you get comfortable about that — there is a second thing in this building that is not permitted, and it has been going on since before either of us was born, and if an officer ever comes up that road he will find it in about four minutes."

I said I knew what she meant.

"Everybody knows what I mean. That is the point. Nobody has said it out loud in fifty years."

And then, because she is not a hard woman and because it cost her something to say the first part, she said:

"And also they are learning something, which they were not in Aban, and I have been doing this eleven years and I know what a room looks like when nothing is going into it, and that is not what your room looks like."

Then she said, "But it's mostly the transfer."

I want to say clearly, because it would be easy to write her as cold: Roshanak is the most straightforwardly decent person in this book. She had a mother in Zanjan and a salary that had been losing value for eleven years and a village that gave her nine hours of electricity, and she made a small hard calculation in her own interest and she told me about it to my face without any decoration, and she went on teaching six-year-olds to hold a pencil for four more months in a room with a bad stove.

Nobody in this account has behaved better and nobody in it will be less thanked.

17.

How cold is a hole in a wall stuffed with rag?

The bokhari in the big room was a kerosene heater of a type that has been illegal in Iranian classrooms for years and is still in something like a hundred thousand of them, because the alternative to an illegal heater is no heater.

Here is what I saw, and I saw it on the first morning, because I have spent my adult life reading buildings and a building cannot lie about what somebody paid for.

The flue went out through the wall at a height and an angle that were both wrong. Somebody had made that hole with a hammer and then made the pipe fit the hole rather than the other way round, and where the pipe met the wall the gap was packed with rag, and the rag was original.

The pipe had a sag in it about a third of the way along. There was a stain on the plaster above the hole that was older than the current paint, which meant it had been reported, painted over, and reported again.

There was no draught to it. That is the technical thing. A flue works because hot gas rises through it and pulls, and this one had a sag and a bad angle and a joint packed with cloth, and on a still cold morning with the door shut and forty children in the room it did not pull, it dribbled.

I got the file out. There is a file. There is always a file, and I have been through a great many of them.

The school had written to the education office about that heater in Aban of the previous year and again in Bahman. Two letters. Both in Roshanak's hand. Both with a stamp. Neither answered.

The part required is a length of flue pipe and a collar.

I asked at the shop what such a thing costs and Asghar told me, and it was less than a lamb and more than a chicken, and it was not in the town, it was in Zanzan, and there was no road.

And the children sat under it six hours a day, six days a week, and dried their gloves on it, and warmed their bread on it by ten, and every so often one of them would put their head down on the desk and be sent out into the yard for air by a teacher who thought they were tired.

I sat in that room after they had gone on a Thursday afternoon with the stove going and the door shut and I stayed there for about forty minutes and paid attention.

Then I went outside and was sick in the snow.

And then I went and found Roshanak and said, "How long has that been like that?"

And she said, "Since before me."

PART THREE — THE BREAK BELL

Questions Eighteen to Twenty-Six

18.

Whose stamp is this?

I condemned the heater on the sixteenth of Dey with a document I invented and a stamp I do not own, and it was replaced in eleven days, and nothing has happened since.

I want to walk you through the work, because it is the only thing in my life I am unambiguously proud of and it took an afternoon.

One. I established what the system actually responds to. Two letters had gone from that school in eleven months and both had been correct and both had been ignored, and I read them, and I understood immediately why. They were requests. A request enters a building in the town, is put in a tray, and joins four hundred other requests, and no individual in that building is worse off if it stays there.

You cannot move a system by asking it for something. You can only move it by making inaction more expensive than action, and the only mechanism this country has ever built for doing that is a piece of paper with a stamp on it that puts a *name* on the consequence.

Two. I found out what such a piece of paper looks like. I did not have to forge anything from imagination — nobody ever does. There was a folder in that school with eleven years of circulars in it, and I sat with them for three hours with a child's dictionary, going very slowly, and I extracted the shape: the register number at the top, the date in both forms, the clause reference, the phrase *bā tavajjoh be* — having regard to — and the two lines at the bottom where a copy goes to somebody else.

That last part is the entire weapon. *A copy goes to somebody else.* A letter with one recipient is a request. A letter with two is a record.

Three. I wrote it. It said that the heating appliance in the eastern classroom of the school at Tang-e Sorkh had been examined and found to be discharging combustion gases into an occupied room, that the flue was of incorrect section and pitch and was not sealed at the wall penetration, that the appliance had been taken out of

service on this date, and that the classroom was consequently unheated and in use by forty pupils in Dey.

And at the bottom: copy to the district health office. Copy to the office of the Friday imam of the town.

Neither of those men has ever heard of me. Neither of them ever received a copy, because there was no road. It did not matter in the slightest. The only person who had to believe a copy had gone was the man opening the envelope.

Four. The stamp. There is a school stamp. It was in the drawer. It is a real stamp belonging to a real school and I was the person holding the keys to that school, and I want to be honest that I have never been able to decide whether using it was a forgery or the most legitimate act of my life.

I put Roshanak's name on nothing. That was deliberate. I signed it in the space for the head of the school, which had been empty since Mehr, in a hand nobody in the town had ever seen, with the name off a card in my coat.

The pipe and collar came up on the eleventh day on a snow tractor with the mail and a man from the office who did not come himself but sent it, which is the whole of the story.

And then nothing happened.

That is the part I want to sit on, because it is the first time in three books that the good thing I did has no shape.

There was no woman who lived. There was no room that wept. There is no moment I can point you to.

There is a building in a gorge in the north-west of this country in which, for thirty years now, nothing has gone wrong on a still cold morning with the door shut.

You cannot photograph it. You cannot thank anybody for it. The children who sat in that room have grown up and had children who sat in that room, and not one of them knows there was ever anything to know, and the correct measure of the thing is the number of people in Tang-e Sorkh who have never once had cause to think about the heater.

I have done one thing in my life that is clean and it is an absence.

19.

Who is looking at whose paper?

The end-of-term examinations were in the second week of Bahman [bah-MAN] and I have never enjoyed two hours more.

Taqallob [ta-ghal-LOB] — cheating — is not, in an Iranian classroom, a furtive individual act. It is infrastructure. It has techniques with names, it has division of labour, it has ethics, and it is passed down.

I stood at the front of that room and watched forty children run it, and I am going to set out what I saw, because I was in a position to see all of it and no teacher in the history of that school has ever been.

The palm. Written small, in pencil, on the inside of the hand, and the hand held in a completely natural half-curl on the desk. The good ones do the formula only, never the answer, because a formula can be explained away as a doodle and an answer cannot.

The ruler. On the underside. The ruler is turned over four times in two hours and each turn is covered by a stretch.

The eraser. On the flat side. Highest risk, because an eraser can be confiscated and read. Used by the reckless.

The desk. In pencil on the wood, to be smudged with a sleeve at the end. Two boys had prepared the desk the previous afternoon by staying behind voluntarily to sweep. I had thought that was very good of them.

The crane. Simply looking at the paper beside you, and it is an art, because the whole thing is in the neck and the neck must move at the speed of a person thinking rather than a person looking.

The chain. Four children in a row, and a number passed backwards by a specified number of taps of a pencil on a desk leg, which they must have practised for weeks and which was, technically, the most impressive thing I saw in four months in that building.

And there is an ethic, and I want to record it because it is real. You do not take from a child who is weaker than you. You do not take from a child who will be beaten for a low mark. The strong ones give, and the giving is a form of standing, and Hamed — who did not need to take anything from anybody — gave to four people in that room and made sure that at least two of them knew it.

I saw every bit of it.

20.

Why did I let them?

I did nothing.

I stood at the front of that room for two hours and I did not stop one single instance of it, and I have been asked about this by exactly one person in my life and I gave him a bad answer, so I am going to give you the real one.

It was not permissiveness. I was not being a nice man. There is a version of this where the teacher smiles indulgently at the little scamps and that man is a liar and I have no time for him.

Here is what actually happened in me.

I looked at a boy in the third row with a formula on his palm, held in a half-curl, breathing carefully, and I knew — completely, physically, in the front of my chest — exactly what he was feeling.

I have felt it six hundred times.

It is not excitement. Everybody outside the trade thinks it is excitement and it is not. It is a very specific narrowing, in which the whole of the world becomes one object and one distance and one sound, and it is the only condition in which I have ever felt entirely present, and it is why I did it for twenty-seven years and not for the money, because there was never very much money.

And the other half of it, which is the part that stopped my hand.

I have never once been caught in the moment.

Not once, in twenty-seven years. Not on a landing, not in a hallway, not going through a window. Every time I have been caught it has

been afterwards, on a different day, by a man with a file, on the basis of something written down. The moment has always been clean and the paperwork has always come for me later.

So I looked at forty children committing the small crime, in the only two hours of the year in which the entire apparatus of the state was pointed at them, and I understood that every one of them was going to be fine right now and that the reckoning, if it came, would come in four years or eleven, from a filing cabinet, in a form they would not recognise as connected to this.

And I could not think of one thing to say to them about it that would not have been a lie coming from me.

So I let them.

Then I marked forty papers, and the marks were wrong, and I knew the marks were wrong, and I wrote □□□□ — afarin [aa-fa-REEN], well done — in red at the top of eleven of them.

Rahmat found out. Of course Rahmat found out; he had been in that building for forty years and he could read a room through a wall.

He said, "You let them copy."

I said I had.

He said, "All of them?"

I said all of them.

And he did not say anything at all for a long time, and then he said, "The seventh of them, the small one at the back with the sister — she was not copying. She was being copied from and she did not know it."

And he went away.

That is Rahmat Sepehri. He did not tell me I was wrong. He gave me one fact I had missed and let me carry it, and I have carried it for twenty years, and it is worse than anything he could have said to me.

21.

What were you doing in the winter of the revolution?

It came out over the stove in Bahman, three days after the examinations, and it came out sideways because everything in this account comes out sideways.

We were talking about the seminaries, because a boy in grade six had said something at home about going to Qom and his mother had come to ask what I thought, and I had said what I thought, which was very little.

And Rahmat said, "I nearly went."

I said I had not known that.

He said he had been twenty-two, and in a seminary in the town for two years, and that in the autumn of 1357 the students had been sent out into the villages.

I put my glass down.

I want to be careful about my own behaviour here, because it is the only time in that whole winter that I did the wrong thing professionally and I did it because I wanted something too much.

I asked him a direct question.

Twenty-seven years in a trade built on never asking the question you want answered, four months of sitting in that man's presence saying almost nothing and letting him decide about me, and I heard *the autumn of 1357* and I said, straight out, like an idiot:

"Sent out to do what?"

He looked at me.

And I watched a seventy-one-year-old man who had been careful for forty-eight years about who came into his village and what they wrote down, and who had been watching a stranger with no papers teach his children since Azar, arrive at a conclusion.

He said, "So that's it."

I said nothing.

He said, "Four months. I knew it was something."

And then — and this is the whole of the man — he did not throw me out and he did not interrogate me. He put his hat on and stood up and said, “Not tonight,” and went home through the snow, and I sat in that room until the stove went out.

He came back on the fourth night with a notebook.

22.

How many columns?

It is a hardback notebook, about the size of a hand, with a cloth spine gone grey, and it has been in a tin in a cupboard in a house in a gorge since Esfand of 1357.

He put it on the table and did not give it to me.

He said, “First you tell me.”

And I told him. Not all of it — I did not tell him what I am, and he did not ask, and I have thought since that the not-asking was deliberate and generous and possibly the largest thing anybody has ever done for me.

I told him that my mother had gone to a shrine in Khorasan [kho-raa-SAAN] in Aban of 1357 and stayed forty nights, and had never mentioned it to anybody for the rest of her life, and had died without mentioning it. That I had seen her name in that shrine’s pilgrim register with my own eyes. That there were four columns and that in the fourth there was something I had taken for a name.

That I had been born the following summer.

He listened to all of it without moving.

Then he said, “Sit down properly,” and opened the notebook.

Four columns.

The same four columns. Not similar — the same, in the same order, with the same proportions, ruled by hand in a different village three hundred kilometres away by a different twenty-two-year-old boy in the same winter.

Name. Place. What they said. And the fourth.

His fourth column has entries in it. Forty-odd of them, in a young man's careful hand, and every one of them is short. Two characters. Sometimes three.

They are not names. I could see that in one second. You do not need to read well to see that forty entries in a column are all drawn from a set of about six.

I said, "What are they?"

And Rahmat Sepehri, who has thought about this for forty-eight years, said:

"That is what I have been waiting my whole life for somebody to ask me."

23.

What goes in the fourth?

He gave it to me in about eleven minutes, over a stove, in a village of two hundred people, forty-eight years after it happened, and it is the only piece of information in this entire account that anybody ever simply handed me.

In the autumn of 1357 the seminaries emptied into the villages.

Everybody knows this. It is in the histories. What the histories say is that the students went out to the countryside to preach and to organise and to explain, and that is true and it is what most of them did.

A number of them were given a different job.

They were given a form. Four columns, ruled by hand, because there was no printing for this. And they were told to go and sit in people's houses — not the mosque, the house — for three days or five, and drink tea, and ask people one question and write down the answer.

What do you want from God?

Rahmat said: "It is a foolish thing to ask a man. If you ask him what he wants from the government he will tell you a lie he prepared on the way. If you ask him what he wants from God he will tell you the

truth, because nobody has ever asked him and he does not know it is dangerous.”

He was twenty-two. He walked to four villages that winter and filled forty-three lines.

And what people wanted, when he asked, was: a child. Water. For a son to come back from somewhere. For a debt. For a man to die. For a daughter’s husband to be different. For a leg. One woman wanted her sister to be sorry, and said so, and he wrote it down.

And then the fourth column.

The fourth column was for the student’s own assessment, entered after he left the house, from a set of codes he had been given verbally in a room in the town in about ninety seconds by a man he never saw again.

Rahmat remembers four of the six. He has never been certain of the other two.

They are not what you would guess. They are not *worthy* and *unworthy*, and they are not political, and I want that stated because it is the first thing everybody assumes.

They are, as far as a man can reconstruct from forty-eight years of thinking about it in a village:

Possible. Meaning: this is a thing that could be arranged by human beings, at a cost, if somebody decided to.

Not possible.

Already happening — for the ones who wanted something that was, unknown to them, already in motion.

And one that Rahmat says was for the cases where the want itself was the problem, and which he entered twice in his life and has never forgiven himself for either.

I sat in that room with my hands flat on the table.

Because do you understand what that is.

That is not a survey. Somebody, in the winter of a revolution, in a country coming apart, took the trouble to send young men with good handwriting into houses to establish, one household at a time,

what an entire population wanted from God — and then to sort those wants by whether they could be arranged.

Not to help. That is the thing I could not get my mouth round and still cannot. Nobody was going to fix these people's lives. Forty-three lines from one boy, and there were hundreds of boys.

You do it because a want that can be arranged is a *lever*, and a want that cannot be arranged is a *weight*, and if you know which is which about enough households you know something about a country that no census will ever tell you.

Rahmat handed his notebook in, in Esfand, in the town, to a man behind a desk who counted the pages and did not read one of them.

Except he did not hand it in. He handed in a copy, in his own hand, and kept the original, and has kept it in a tin for forty-eight years, and has never told one living person until a man with no papers turned up in his village and asked the wrong question over a stove.

I asked him why he kept it.

And he said, "Because they asked forty-three people the truest thing anybody ever asked them, and then they took the paper away, and I did not think that should be the whole of it."

24.

And what did they do with the ones they kept?

He does not know.

I want to be extremely clear about this because it is the entire architecture of this book and it is the reason this is a book about knowledge.

I got the answer. I got a real, verified, first-hand answer from a man who was there and who had the physical document in a tin, and it was better than anything I had constructed in two years, and it explained the form and the purpose and the machinery.

And it tells me nothing whatsoever about my mother.

Here is why, and he laid it out himself, unprompted, because he is a teacher and he has spent his life making sure a child understands the limits of what he has just been given.

The codes were never standardised. Ninety seconds in a room, verbally, to boys who never met each other, in different towns, from different men. Rahmat's set of six is Rahmat's set of six. The boy who went to Khorasan had his own ninety seconds from his own man and there is no reason on earth to think the marks meant the same thing.

The villages were different. He asked in the house. Somebody else may have asked at a shrine, of pilgrims, which is a different population entirely and a different question — a woman who has travelled four hundred kilometres and is forty nights into a chelleh is not a householder giving an opinion over tea.

The collector is dead. The man behind the desk in the town who counted pages without reading them died in the war, in 1361. Rahmat knows this because he asked, in 1367, and was told.

And the notebooks went somewhere and nobody has ever seen them again.

So I sat in a cold room in Bahman with the entire mechanism laid out in front of me, in a hand I could barely read, explained by the only man in Iran who could have explained it — and I was further from my mother than I had been in the tunnel.

I had gone west after a name. I had been corrected, ninety feet under a desert, by a colleague in a bad mood, and told the fourth column was not for names, and I had spent a year turning that over.

And now I knew what it was for.

And what it means is that beside Parvaneh Fani, in a register in a salt town I can never enter again, there are two characters, entered by a boy whose name nobody has, from a code list he was told out loud, about a want she told the truth about because nobody had ever asked her.

And I do not know what she wanted.

That is the sentence. Everything else in this book is arrangement around that sentence. I have the machinery and not the line. I know exactly what kind of thing was done and I do not know what was done.

Rahmat watched me work through it and said nothing at all, for a long time, and then said:

“Now you know the road. It is not your road.”

And I said something bitter, which I regret.

And he said, “No. Listen. Every man’s road is his own. That is not consolation, it is the arrangement. What I have given you is a map of somewhere else, and there is no other kind.”

25.

How does an owl justify a life?

The birds are on the curriculum.

I had not known that. I had heard about them twice — once at the top of a well from a man who got them wrong, and once from myself, getting them wrong worse — and it had never occurred to me that the poem was a school text and that every literate person in this country has met it at about the age of eleven.

Rahmat has taught it for forty years and he told it to me properly, and it is the only time in my life anybody has.

All the birds of the world assemble, because they want a king. And the hoopoe stands up, who has seen Solomon and knows the way, and says: you have a king, he is called the Simorgh [see-MORGH], he lives a very long way off beyond seven valleys, and I will take you.

And then, one at a time, every bird stands up and explains why it cannot go.

The nightingale cannot go, because he loves a rose. The parrot only wants to live forever. The peacock wants his old garden back and nothing else. The duck cannot leave the water. The partridge is in love with jewels in the mountain and cannot look up from them. The

hawk is proud of the king's wrist and does not see the point of another king.

And the owl.

Rahmat did the owl properly, with his hat on, over a stove.

The owl lives in the ruins. Not in a tree — in ruins, in the broken places, and the reason he will not go on the journey is that *there is treasure buried under the ruins*, and he knows it, and he has known it his whole life, and he cannot leave in case somebody else gets it.

He is not asked to hand it over. He is not asked to prove it is there. He is only asked to come, and he will not, because leaving means the treasure is unattended.

And the hoopoe says something to him and they set off without him.

I said, "Is he right? Is there treasure?"

And Rahmat said, "The poem does not say."

I said that seemed like an oversight.

And he looked at me for a moment with his hat on and said, "Does it."

26.

Who corrected me?

I told it to the class on the Sunday.

I want to be honest about my motives: I told it because I had understood, over four months, that I could hold a room with a story for a whole lesson without opening a book, and a story I had just been given for free was a full lesson I did not have to survive some other way.

I got it wrong.

Not slightly. I got the nightingale and the rose right because I had had two goes at it. I got the duck approximately. I gave the peacock the parrot's excuse. I said there were seven deserts, because that is what a man told me at the top of a well in another province, and Rahmat had said valleys three days earlier and I had heard him and it had not gone in.

And I put the owl in a tree.

I had the whole thing — the treasure, the not-leaving, the refusal — and I put him in a tree, because I am a man from Tehran and an owl is in a tree.

And a girl in grade four, nine years old, called Sanaz, put her hand up and said:

“Aqa. He’s in the ruins.”

I said, “The tree.”

And she said, “The ruins. It’s in the book. There’s a picture.”

And she got the book — grade four, the reader, page something, with the plate in it that every child in this country has seen — and she brought it up to my desk and put her finger on it and there is an owl in a ruin.

And thirty-nine children waited to see what I would do.

Rahmat was at the back of the room. He had come in about ten minutes earlier and sat down, which he did perhaps twice a week by then.

He did not say anything.

He watched a man who could not read the page being corrected out of the page by a nine-year-old in front of forty people, and he did not intervene, and I understood completely why: he was not protecting me and he was not exposing me, he was doing the thing he had done in that room for forty years, which is to let a child who is right be right, in public, at the expense of an adult, because it is one of the four or five things that actually changes a person.

So I said, “She’s right. It’s the ruins. Sanaz, come and tell them why it matters that it’s the ruins and not a tree.”

And she went red and said she didn’t know why it mattered.

And I said, “Neither do I. That’s why I’m asking.”

She thought about it for a long time in front of everybody, which is a hard thing to make a room allow, and then she said:

"Because a tree is where a bird lives. The ruins are where something fell down."

I have never heard anybody say anything better about that poem, and I have since had it explained to me by two educated men.

Rahmat got up and went out and did not say a word to me about it, then or afterwards, and I did not need him to.

PART FOUR — THE SMOKE

Questions Twenty-Seven to Thirty-Four

27.

What use am I to you?

Mahnaz rang on a Tuesday in the middle of Bahman and the telephone in the shop took eleven minutes to connect and Asghar stood four feet away throughout, pretending to do stock.

I want to explain the signal situation in Tang-e Sorkh because it matters later. There is one point in that village where a telephone works, and it is outside the shop, and it works for about two-thirds of the time, and everybody knows this, and consequently every private conversation anybody in that village has ever had has been conducted in public in a doorway with a man doing stock four feet away.

She said, "It's me."

I said I knew.

She said, "Where are you?"

I said north-west.

There was a pause of exactly the right length to tell me she had written that down.

Then she said, "There's a man called Davoud."

Now. I am not going to tell you what she wanted, in this book, because she did not tell me in this book. She told me the shape of it and nothing else, and the shape of it was this: there is a man called Davoud who is connected to her sister's family, and there is a matter which is not a legal matter and cannot become one, and there will come a point at which it would be extremely useful if a man in a coat that people trust were to sit in a room with him for one hour.

Not to threaten him. She was very clear about that and I believed her.

To be *present*, in the character of somebody whose presence changes what a man is prepared to say in front of witnesses.

I said, "That's not what the coat is for."

And she said, "What is it for?"

I did not have an answer. I have thought about it since and I still do not have one that survives being said out loud.

Then she said, "I'm not asking you to lie to anybody. I'm asking you to sit down."

And I said I would think about it, which we both understood to be a yes.

Here is what I want you to see about Mahnaz, because it is the most frightening thing in this account and there is no violence in it anywhere.

Shokouh knew what I was and protected me, and asked nothing.

Nasrin knew what I was and used me carefully, and built a machine in which I could not do harm, and never once let me touch a decision.

Mahnaz simply *has* me. She has a telephone number I gave her voluntarily on a step in Sattarkhan, and a daughter who does not know, and a completely accurate valuation of the only asset I possess, and she does not want to hurt me or expose me or understand me. She wants to use the thing for what it is good for, in the way you would use a ladder.

And the horror of it is that she is not wrong. That is precisely what the coat is for. I have used it for exactly that in three provinces and told myself a story about each one.

She has done me the courtesy of removing the story.

Asghar, four feet away, said, "Family?"

I said, "My wife."

He said, "Ah," in the tone of a man to whom that explains a very great deal, and went back to the stock.

28.

When does the road open?

The tooth started properly in the third week of Bahman.

I had noticed it on a wall in Azar and thought *well, that will keep*, which is a sentence that has cost more men more of their lives than any other in the language.

It did keep, for nine weeks, in the way that a tooth does — a cold ache on one side, avoidable if you chew on the other, dismissible entirely if you have something else to think about, and I had a village to run.

Then on a Wednesday I could not put my head on the pillow on the left.

By the Friday the side of my face had a shape.

Now let me set out the actual position, because everybody who has not lived in a place like that assumes there was some option I did not take.

The nearest dentist is in the town. The town is four hours in good weather. There was no weather at all: the pass had been shut since the eleventh day of Azar and would open, in a normal year, somewhere in the middle of Esfand, and in a bad one not until Farvardin, and this was not a normal year.

There is a snow tractor. It comes when it comes. It brings mail and takes nothing.

There is no clinic in Tang-e Sorkh. There is a health house — a *khaneh behdasht* — which is a room with a trained village health worker in it, and hers was excellent and she is not in this book because she was away in Zanzan with her mother from Dey to Esfand, which is the entire reason everything that follows happened.

So: an abscess, six weeks minimum, no dentist, no road, no antibiotic in the village that had not expired, and a man of forty-seven with no papers who could not have gone to a hospital anyway without a conversation he could not survive.

I want to record that I got through nine days of it and taught every one of them. Not heroically. I have had worse and I have had worse in Vakilabad with less. But by the ninth day I had not slept more than two hours together for a week and I was standing in front of forty children doing the choreography with half my face wrong, and Roshanak took the grade six lesson off me on the Sunday without asking.

And on the Monday an old woman came to the school and stood in the doorway and looked at me and said:

"Come to the house tonight. I will do the thing my mother did."

29.

What did your mother do for a tooth?

Tātureh [taa-too-REH].

It grows wild all over this country. You have walked past it a thousand times: a coarse weed with a big white trumpet flower that opens in the evening and smells of nothing good, and a spiny seed pod like a small mace, and inside the pod perhaps a hundred flat black seeds.

And for as long as there have been villages with no dentist, which is as long as there have been villages, the seeds have gone on a coal, and a cloth has gone over the head, and the person with the tooth has breathed it.

It works. That is the first thing to say and everybody skips it. It works extremely well; it dries and it numbs and the pain goes a long way off, and by morning the side of your face is a different proposition.

Nobody calls it a drug. I want that on the record with the same weight I gave to a paper cone of esfand [es-FAND] burned against the evil eye in every taxi in Tehran. It is not a substance and it is not a ritual and it is certainly not a rite. *It is what an old woman gives you for a tooth.* It sits in a twist of cloth in a tin on a shelf between the salt and the tea.

And it is a deliriant, which is a different animal from anything else in this account, and I did not know that word until four years afterwards and I want you to have it before I tell you what happened, because you deserve better than I got.

Smoke in a sealed stone chamber makes the walls breathe and time come apart, and a man knows, somewhere, that he is a man having an experience.

Bad air ninety feet under a desert makes you warm and pleased and removes the faculty by which you would notice, and there is at least a hole in the ground and a rope and afterwards you are sick.

Tātureh does not do any of that.

Tātureh puts *people* in the room. Ordinary people, doing ordinary things, at ordinary volume, who behave exactly as they behave, and you talk to them, and there is not one single moment anywhere in it in which any part of you suspects anything at all.

And then you cannot remember it.

Not “it is hazy.” *It is not there.* The mechanism does not lay it down. You can have two hours of the most important conversation of your life with total clarity and complete presence, and then be handed back an empty tape.

I did not know that.

I sat in an old woman’s front room in Tang-e Sorkh in the third week of Bahman with a brazier between my feet and a cloth over my head, breathing the smoke of a weed that grows on waste ground, for my tooth.

Rahmat was there.

He came in about twenty minutes after I did and sat down against the wall with his hat on and said, “Somebody sits with you. That is how it is done.”

I said I was fine.

And he said, “Everybody is fine. That is the problem with it,” and took out a notebook.

30.

Who is sitting in the room?

My mother came in and sat down.

She came in from the yard, the way she came in from the yard, and she was wearing the housecoat with the small flowers that she had for about eleven years and that I had not thought about once since 1998, and she was carrying a bowl and a cloth and she was doing something to a bowl of herbs, which is what she did with her hands for four decades whenever she was in a room and talking.

She sat down about a metre from me, on the floor, with her back not quite straight because of the hip, and she started picking through the herbs.

And she said, "Well, look at your face."

I want you to understand that there was nothing strange about this.

That is the thing I have never been able to convey to anybody and it is the whole of the experience. There was no light. Nothing shimmered. Nothing announced itself. There was no sense whatever of an event occurring. My mother, who had been dead for some years, came in from the yard with a bowl and sat down on the floor and remarked on the state of my face, and I was not surprised, because why would you be surprised, and I said:

"It's a tooth."

And she said, "It's always a tooth with you. Your father was the same."

And we talked.

For — I am told — a little over two hours.

I remember four things, and I have counted them, and I have never got a fifth in twenty years no matter what I have done.

One. The housecoat with the small flowers.

Two. That she picked through those herbs the whole time and did not look up much, which is exactly right, because she never did.

Three. That at some point I asked her. I asked her the question. I know that I asked her because I remember the physical sensation of asking it — the specific loosening in the chest of a thing you have carried for two years leaving your mouth — and I remember that my voice was steady.

Four. That she answered.

She answered fully. She was not evasive and she was not mysterious and she did not speak in riddles, because she was not a ghost and she was not a vision and she was not God, she was my mother, who was the plainest speaker I have ever known and who could not have been oracular if you had paid her.

She sat on the floor with a bowl of herbs and told me, in order, at length, in her own voice, what she had wanted, and why she went, and what she said to the boy with the notebook, and what happened afterwards.

I know she did. I know it the way you know you had a dream.

And I do not have one word of it.

31.

What did she say?

Nothing. I have nothing.

I came back at about four in the morning in an old woman's front room with a cloth on the floor beside me and my mouth completely dry and a thirst I have never had before or since, and Rahmat asleep sitting up against the wall with his hat on.

And I sat up and I knew immediately, the way you know before you have opened your eyes that something in the room has been moved, that I had had it and did not have it.

I want to try to describe the specific quality of that and I am going to fail, and I have failed at it for twenty years in front of the two people I have ever tried it on.

It is not forgetting. Forgetting has a texture — you circle it, you get the shape, you get a word, it comes back at four in the afternoon

while you are doing something else. I have forgotten a great deal in my life and I know what it feels like from the inside.

This was *not laid down*. There is nothing to circle. It is not behind anything. There is a two-hour hole with clean edges and my mother is in it and I have been walking round the outside of it since Bahman of 1405.

I know I asked. I know she answered. I know it was complete.

And the joke — because there is one, and it is the flattest and worst in this book and I have never been able to stop making it — is that I finally got somebody to give me a straight answer and it turns out I am the part of the arrangement that does not work.

Every instrument in this story has been unreliable. The register was in a hand I could not read. The tunnel spoke in corrections. The notebook was a map of somewhere else. And when at last the actual person sat down on the floor in front of me with a bowl of herbs and told me the whole thing in plain Persian, in order, patiently, for two hours —

— the instrument that failed was me.

I have thought about that against every religious idea I have been handed in three professions and it does not go anywhere good.

I lay on the floor of that room until it was light and did not move.

The tooth was enormously better.

32.

Why does this man write everything down?

He gave me the paper on the last morning, and I am putting it here rather than there because you should have it now, at the moment it happened, and not filed where he chose to hand it over.

Rahmat Sepehri sat against a wall for two and a quarter hours with a notebook on his knee and wrote down what I said.

He did not do it because he suspected anything. He did it because he is a man who was given a notebook at twenty-two and told to write down what people say when they are in a state in which they

say true things, and he did that job for one winter and has not been able to stop for forty-eight years, and he has told me since that he has notebooks for his wife's last month and for both his sons and for a man who died in his house in 1372.

He wrote down my half of it. He could not hear hers.

He said it was mostly ordinary. He said — and this is a direct quotation and I have never let go of it — “You were being told off about something and you were enjoying it.”

And he said that at intervals, over two hours, perhaps thirty times, I said a name.

Not *Parvaneh*. Not *Maman*. He is certain about that and he wrote both of those down elsewhere on the page because I said them too.

A name he wrote out phonetically, four times, at four different points, to be sure he had it, because it is not a common name and because he is exactly that kind of man.

He did not tell me any of this in the old woman's front room and he did not tell me for the whole of Esfand.

He wrote it in a notebook and put the notebook in a tin and waited three weeks, and I now understand why, and it is not what I thought at the time.

He was deciding whether to give it to me at all.

33.

How many is eleven?

They took Hamed out in Farvardin.

I knew in Bahman, because everybody knew in Bahman, because it is not a decision that gets made in a village of two hundred people without being discussed in the shop for six weeks first.

Here is the arithmetic, and I am setting it out in full because everybody who has never lived it thinks there is a mistake in it, and there is no mistake in it.

He is eleven. He finishes grade five in Khordad. Grade six is one more year and there is no guidance school in Tang-e Sorkh, so after

grade six the road ends: you go to the town, which means somewhere to live in the town, which means money and a relative and a bed.

There is no relative. There is no bed.

His father does seasonal work and his uncle has the pickup and his older sister is married and there are two younger. And a boy of twelve with his hands and his head can go with the uncle and be earning by Tir.

Not much. Enough that the arithmetic of the household changes.

Against that: one more year of a school in a gorge, taught by whoever turns up, which this year happened to be a burglar.

They are right. I want that written down without any softening at all, because the temptation is enormous and it is a lie. Those are not stupid people and they are not cruel people and they love that boy, and given the actual options in front of them in the actual country they are standing in, they did the correct sum and got the correct answer.

The thing that is wrong is not the family. The thing that is wrong is that those were the options.

And I could do nothing.

That is the part that has stayed. In Shurabad I could not fix a shrine but I could bless a kitchen. In Ab-Bidar I could not practise medicine but I could put a woman in a car. Here I had a condemned heater and a stamp and forty names.

I had nothing for Hamed. A man with no papers, under a false name, in a village with no road, wanted in three provinces, with ninety thousand tomans — there is no version of me that walks into that house and says a useful sentence. I could not fund him. I could not house him in the town. I could not put my name on anything, because my name is a card in my coat belonging to a doctor who is presumably still wondering what happened to his bag.

I went through it for about four weeks the way I used to go through a building, looking for the way in.

There was no way in. Some buildings do not have one. I had never actually met one before.

34.

His last day was the ninth of Farvardin.

The pass had opened four days earlier and the uncle was going down on the eleventh, and there was nothing formal about it, because nobody leaves an Iranian school formally. You simply stop being there.

He came in the morning and did the whole day. Mathematics, which he did not need. Emlā, which Roshanak took. The break.

At the break he sold seeds in the yard as usual and settled his ledger.

I watched him do it from the doorway. He went round the yard with the exercise book, upside down, and he went to each of the thirty-one names in turn, and he crossed them out.

All of them. Every debt in the book. He did not collect one rial.

He did it fast and without ceremony and mostly they did not understand what was happening, and two of the older ones did, and one of those said something to him and he shrugged.

Then he came and stood next to me in the doorway and looked at the yard.

He said, "Aqa."

I said yes.

He said, "The book's finished."

I said I had seen.

He said, "You can have it. For the little ones. There's paper at the back that hasn't been used."

I said that was very good of him.

And he said, "It's not. It's only the back."

Then the bell went and we both went in, and I taught the afternoon, and at the end of it he put his chair on the desk with everybody else

and went out through the door and down the steps and did not look round, and that is the last time I saw him.

I have his exercise book. I have carried it for twenty years. The fractions are in the front in a child's hand, and if you turn it over, thirty-one names are in the back with a line through every one.

PART FIVE — TWENTY

Questions Thirty-Five to Forty

35.

What is the mark for a paper that is wrong?

The year's records had to be filled in before I went, and I did all forty in one night at the end of Esfand with the stove going, and it is the most frightening thing I have ever done and there was nobody in the room.

Everything in an Iranian school is out of twenty. *Nomreh* [nom-REH] — the mark. Twenty is perfect and everybody in the country knows what twenty means and nobody has ever had to have it explained.

And the record book is not a report card. It is the document that says whether a child passes the year, and it goes to the office in the town, and it is what exists about that child in the world.

Forty of them. In one night. By a man with a functional reading age of grade three, out of examinations he had watched be copied wholesale and marked wrong on purpose.

I want to describe the specific terror of it, because it is a different animal from anything in the other two books.

A stolen coat is a thing you do to strangers and it lasts an evening. A forged supervision log is a thing you do to an institution, and institutions can take it.

A mark is a thing you do to a *person*, and it does not go away, and it arrives in front of somebody in four years or eleven, in an office, attached to a decision, and nobody will ever be able to trace it back to a cold room in a gorge.

I did it the only way I could, which is that I did not use the examinations at all.

I used the four months.

For each of those forty children I sat and thought about the child. Where they hurried. Where they went flat. Which line they leaned on. What they had said on the first morning when they stood up and told me one true thing. Whether they had got better since Azar, which is the only question that has ever meant anything.

And then I wrote a number.

They are not accurate. I want to be honest: they cannot be, and about nine of them are certainly wrong, and I have no way of knowing which nine.

But I will say this for them, and it is the only defence I have ever offered for anything I did in that village: *they are not random, and they are not the examinations*. A number produced by a fraud thinking hard about a specific child for four months is a better instrument than a number produced correctly from a paper the child copied off his neighbour.

That is either the most cynical sentence in this account or the least, and I have given up trying to decide which, and I suspect by now that the whole of my life has been made out of sentences like it.

There are two entries on that page in a heavier hand than the rest.

I went back to them. Somewhere after three in the morning I turned back and did two of them again, and I pressed too hard, and the paper shows it, and I could not tell you now which two children they were or what I changed or why I went back.

That is the whole of my method laid out in blue ballpoint: thirty-eight decisions taken once, and two taken twice by a man who had stopped being able to think, and no way at all of knowing which of the forty were the nine I got wrong.

I gave the small one at the back with the sister — the one Rahmat told me about, the one who was being copied from and did not know — a seventeen.

She had earned about a nineteen and a half.

I did that deliberately and I am not going to explain it and I have never once been comfortable with it.

36.

Eleven weeks.

I have told you about the eleven weeks twice. I am going to do it a third time and then I will not do it again.

It was a professional observation about women, in the first book, and I was pleased with myself: six to eleven weeks of being an extraordinarily good man, and then the lamp goes off, and eleven weeks is how long you can watch a person before you have to know them.

In the second book I worked out I had been doing it to towns.

In a gorge in Esfand, on a wall, with a face that was better and a hole in my memory with clean edges in it, I got the last piece, and I got it because of the pass.

I have never left anywhere.

Not once. Every single departure in my adult life has been a thing that happened to me. In the salt town I stood at the top of the road with a bag and a bus opened its door and asked me if I was coming and I said no, and what got me out four months later was a page in a register. In the clinic what got me out was a brown envelope with a window in it. Before all of that, what got me out of my marriage was Mahnaz putting a theory down on a Tuesday afternoon, and what got me out of every one of the thirty-odd arrangements before and after was not a decision either; it was a lamp going off, which is a thing that occurs.

Tang-e Sorkh is the first place in my life that physically would not let me go.

Four months. No door. Not a locked door — no door.

And in the fourth month I noticed something that I have not been able to put down since, which is that *the eleven weeks came and went and nothing happened*.

Week eleven was somewhere in the middle of Bahman. I was arguing with a nine-year-old about his brother's fingernails and condemning a heater and being corrected about an owl. The lamp did not go off. There was no moment in the fourteenth week where I looked at forty children and could not remember why I had asked about the sister.

I have spent my whole life believing that thing in me was a fault in my wiring.

It is not. It is a *procedure*. It is what I do when a door is available, and I have had a door available since I was seventeen years old, and I have used it every single time without ever once experiencing myself as choosing.

Take the door away and the fault does not appear.

I would like to tell you what I did with that discovery.

I got on a truck in Farvardin.

37.

What did you write down?

He gave me the paper on the last morning in the school, standing up, with his hat on.

A page torn out of a notebook. Folded once.

He said, "You said a name."

I said I did not remember any of it.

He said, "I know. That is why I wrote it."

I opened it. He had written it four times, phonetically, at four different points down the page with a small mark beside each, because he had wanted to be certain and because he is that kind of man.

I have never heard it in my life.

I want to be exact about this, because it is the thing that undoes my own explanation and I have not been able to repair it in twenty years.

I have held one position about all of this since the smoke in a stone chamber in Shurabad. A hallucination cannot tell you anything. It can only give you back what you already had, arranged in a way you did not expect, and I have said that to myself in a courtyard at four in the morning and at the top of a well and I have believed it.

Ninety feet under a desert something corrected me on a point of procedure I had never considered. I explained that away, with help, as a thing I must have seen in a register and not admitted to knowing.

That explanation cannot be made to cover a name I have never heard.

You cannot see a name you have never heard. There is nowhere for it to have come from. Either my mother said it in a room in Tang-e Sorkh in the third week of Bahman, or my own head manufactured a specific unusual Persian name and said it thirty times over two hours for reasons of its own.

I hold the second. I want that on the record. I hold it in the way you hold a rail.

I said, "Does it mean anything to you?"

And Rahmat Sepehri, seventy-one years old, standing in a classroom he had taught in for forty years, with his hat on, said:

"Not now."

And went out.

38.

Where will you go?

Roshanak's fifth application went out on the snow tractor on the second of Farvardin.

I wrote it. Not the content — the content was hers and it was correct and it had been correct four times. I did to it what I had done to the heater, which is the one trade I have that is worth anything.

The four previous applications were requests. They had gone to one office and sat in one tray and no individual in that building had been one rial worse off for leaving them there.

The fifth one had a second recipient, and a register number, and a date in both forms, and a clause reference, and it did not ask to be transferred. It stated that the applicant had completed four years in a Category Three rural posting; that under the relevant provision this generated an entitlement; that the entitlement had been applied for on four occasions with reference numbers, which I listed; and that a copy of this letter had been placed with the provincial education board.

No copy was placed anywhere. There is no provincial education board that receives things in that way. It made no difference whatsoever, because the only person who had to believe it was the man opening the envelope, and the letter's real content — its only content — was: *there is now a written record that four requests were ignored, and it has your name on it.*

She got Zanjan in Mordad. Her mother is there. She has been teaching in a school with four hundred children and a functioning boiler for twenty years.

I did not tell her I had done it. She found out, because she is not stupid and she read the copy, and she came and stood in the doorway of the big room and said:

"You put a clause reference in it."

I said I had.

She said, "There is no such clause."

And I said, "There is now."

She looked at me for a long moment.

And then — and this is the last thing, and it is why I said she was the most straightforwardly decent person in this book — she did not thank me. She said:

"You could do this for a living. Properly. For people. There is a whole trade of it and they are called something and they get paid."

I said I did not think I would be eligible.

And she said, "No. I suppose not," and went back to her six-year-olds, and that is the warmest conversation I have ever had in my life.

39.

Four men.

The pass opened on the fifth of Farvardin.

I want to record what four months does, because I did not expect it and it is not what anybody thinks.

I had been counting the days to that pass since Azar. I had walked to the shoulder eleven times a week and looked at it. For the first four days after it closed I had been in the condition of a man drowning in slow motion at room temperature.

And when it opened I felt nothing at all.

Not relief. Not dread. A road that had been shut was open, the way a shop opens, and I went on teaching for six more days and taught them perfectly well.

I have been four men now.

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 a village on a dying qanat for fourteen weeks. I was a teacher in a gorge for four months, and of the four of them it is the only one I would do again, and it is also the one where I did the most damage, and I have not been able to get those two facts to stand apart.

The count is not a joke and it has never been a joke. I counted six hundred doors and eighty apologies and four hundred thousand tomans and the eleven weeks, and now I count men, and the number goes up and does not come down, and I have started to be afraid of it in a way I was not afraid at three.

Because at three you can still say it is a run of luck.

At four it is a career.

The truck was Hamed's uncle's, going down empty on the eleventh. I paid him and he tried to refuse and I insisted and he took it, which is the correct sequence and took four minutes.

Forty children in a yard, in a line, in the cold, at ten past seven, because I ran the saf on my last morning as I had run it on every other morning, and I inspected forty sets of fingernails and told Mahdi Rezaei that his were a disgrace to his mother.

He said they were not.

I said they were.

And Roshanak took them in, and I did not make a speech, because you do not, because there is no format for it and I have never once

been in a room as myself and was not going to attempt it in front of forty children.

40.

And what does that name mean to you?

Rahmat came to the truck.

That surprised me. He is not a man who comes to trucks. He came down through the snow with his hat on and stood by the door while the uncle was tying something, and neither of us said anything for a while, which is how we had conducted the entire four months.

I had the paper in my coat.

I said, "You said not now."

And he said, "It is now."

And then he told me.

I am not going to write it here. I want you to understand that this is not a device — I have set down a great deal in these three accounts that does me no credit at all, and I have not withheld anything to make you turn a page.

I am not writing it here because of what it obliges me to do, and because of who it obliges me to do it to, and because at the time of writing this I have not done it yet, and if I set it down now and then fail, this becomes a document about a man who knew and did not go.

I will say three things about it.

The first is that he had known since the moment he wrote it down in an old woman's front room in the third week of Bahman, and he sat with that for six weeks and taught in my classroom twice a week and drank tea with me and said nothing, and I have thought about that restraint more than I have thought about the name.

The second is that it is not a person from my life, or my mother's, or Vahedi's. It is not in Shurabad and it is not in the register and it is not a thing I could have gone looking for, and this is the reason I

cannot make my own explanation cover it and have stopped pretending I can.

The third is what he actually said, standing by a truck, which was two sentences and took about eleven seconds.

The first sentence told me who.

The second sentence was:

"He is still alive. He is not far from where you are going."

And he put his hand on my arm above the elbow, which he had never done, and said, "Do not go straight there."

Then he went back up through the snow.

The uncle finished with the rope and got in and started the engine and we went down out of the gorge, and I looked back once at a building with a green cross of a flagpole and a bent blackboard and a new flue on the eastern wall.

There is a poem about thirty birds who went a long way to find a king.

I have had it told to me properly now, by a man who taught it for forty years, and I got it wrong the same week in front of forty children and a nine-year-old put me right out of the book.

There is an owl in it who will not go. He lives in the ruins and there is treasure buried under them and he has known it all his life and cannot leave it unattended, and the others go without him.

I asked whether there was really treasure and was told that the poem does not say.

I have been four men and I have a piece of paper in my coat with a name on it written four times, and I am on a road going somewhere with a man who is still alive at the end of it.

I do not know yet whether I am going, or leaving.

GLOSSARY

afarin aa-fa-REEN — Persian. well done, bravo. Written in red at the top of a child's page; the standard mark of approval in an Iranian school.

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*.

bokhari bo-khaa-REE — Persian. stove, heater. The kerosene room heater of Iranian schools, offices and houses; flued through a hole in the wall.

emlā em-LAA — Arabic via Persian. dictation. The lesson in which a passage is read aloud and written down, marked out of twenty, where a misplaced letter costs half a mark.

hefz HEFZ — Arabic via Persian. To commit to memory; and also to preserve, to guard, to keep safe. The organising principle of Iranian primary education.

kalbās kal-BAAS — from the Russian kolbasa, sausage. Bologna. At the top of the sandwich hierarchy of any Iranian schoolyard.

konkur kon-KOOR — from the French concours. The national university entrance examination; the single most consequential day in an Iranian life.

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, the owl will not leave the ruins because there is treasure buried beneath them. Their guide is the hoopoe. It is taught in Iranian schools.

nomreh nom-REH — Persian. mark, grade. Out of twenty in every Iranian school. Twenty is perfect and needs no explanation to anybody.

qanat gha-NAAT — Arabic via Persian. channel. A hand-dug tunnel bringing water by gravity from an aquifer to a settlement, with vertical shafts every thirty or forty metres.

roopoosh roo-POOSH — Persian. overall, smock. The school coat, worn over ordinary clothes.

saf SAF — Arabic via Persian. row, rank, line. The morning assembly, formed up by grade in the yard: anthem, announcements, and an inspection of nails, hair and collars.

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

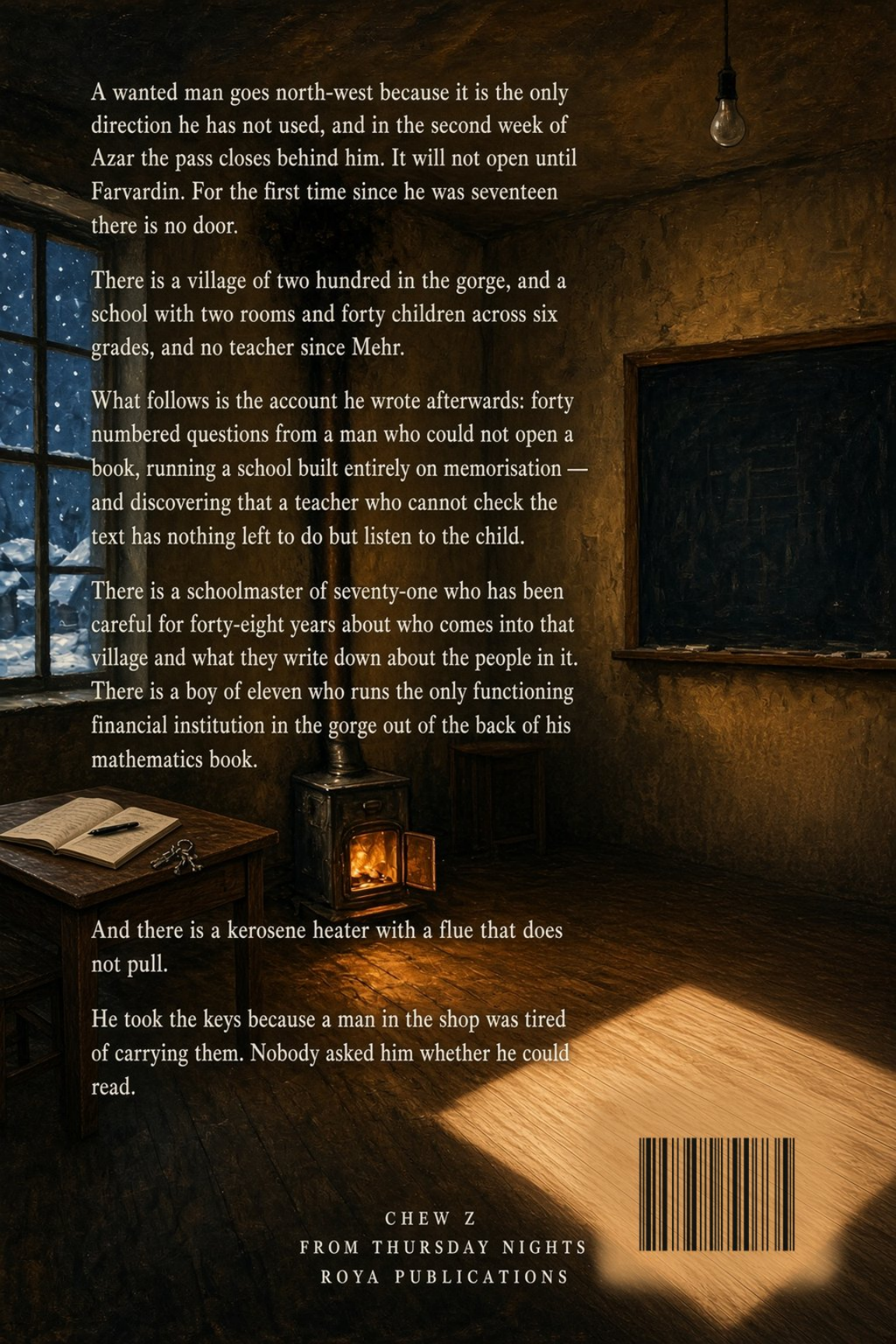
taqallob ta-ghal-LOB — Arabic via Persian. fraud, deception. In a classroom, cheating: an infrastructure with techniques, a division of labour and its own ethics.

tanbih tan-BEEH — Arabic via Persian. correction, chastisement. Corporal punishment in school. Forbidden for longer than living memory and entirely universal.

tātureh taa-too-REH — Persian. *Datura stramonium*, thorn-apple. A coarse weed of waste ground with a white trumpet flower and a spiny seed pod. The seeds burned and inhaled under a cloth are the traditional village remedy for toothache. A deliriant.

toman toh-MAAN — from the Mongolian *tūmen*, ten thousand. The unit Iranians count in, equal to ten rials.

zang-e tafrih ZAN-ge taf-REEH — Persian. the recreation bell. The break between lessons; twenty minutes in the yard. The most fondly remembered two words in the language.

A dimly lit room with a window showing snow, a chalkboard, a kerosene heater, and a table with books.

A wanted man goes north-west because it is the only direction he has not used, and in the second week of Azar the pass closes behind him. It will not open until Farvardin. For the first time since he was seventeen there is no door.

There is a village of two hundred in the gorge, and a school with two rooms and forty children across six grades, and no teacher since Mehr.

What follows is the account he wrote afterwards: forty numbered questions from a man who could not open a book, running a school built entirely on memorisation — and discovering that a teacher who cannot check the text has nothing left to do but listen to the child.

There is a schoolmaster of seventy-one who has been careful for forty-eight years about who comes into that village and what they write down about the people in it. There is a boy of eleven who runs the only functioning financial institution in the gorge out of the back of his mathematics book.

And there is a kerosene heater with a flue that does not pull.

He took the keys because a man in the shop was tired of carrying them. Nobody asked him whether he could read.

CHEW Z
FROM THURSDAY NIGHTS
ROYA PUBLICATIONS

