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No. 76



هواخوری

THE AIRING

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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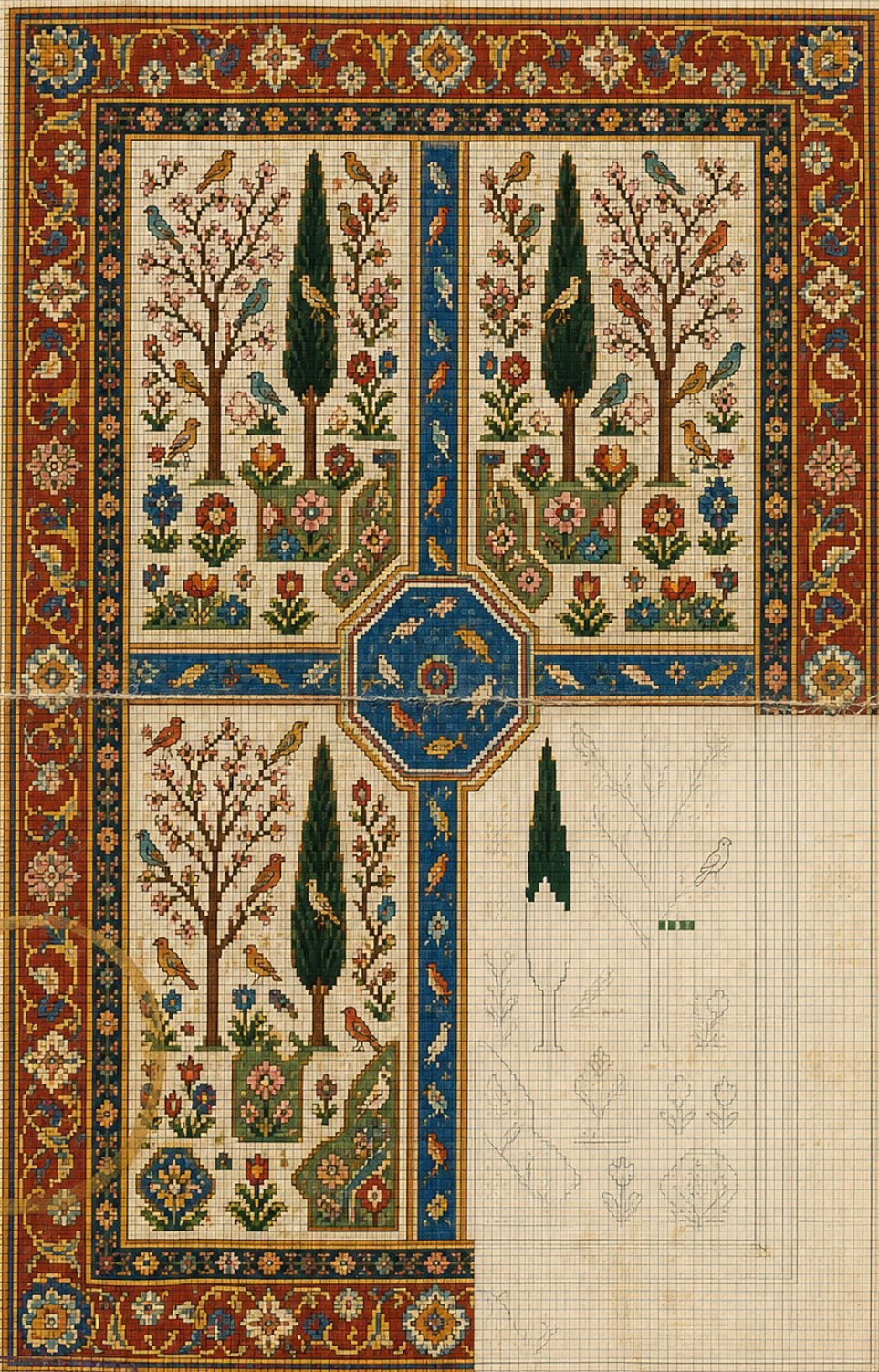
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FROM THURSDAY NIGHTS

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کارگاه نقشه بافی

تأیید انجمن

موسسه تحقیقات و توسعه

SYNOPSIS

He has been in the town nine weeks doing nothing, which he is extremely good at and nobody has ever paid him for. He has a folded page in his coat with a name on it written four times, and an instruction from an old schoolmaster not to go straight there.

On a Tuesday in the third week of Tir a car stops outside the wrong guesthouse, a man in a lanyard makes two telephone calls that are not answered, and then looks up a street containing four people, one of whom is a man of forty-seven sitting alone outside a tea place at twenty to nine, evidently waiting for something.

Aqa-ye bāzras?

He has four seconds. He has had four seconds three times before, and every previous time he said yes out of terror, or because somebody answered for him, or because he wanted to be warm. This time he does the arithmetic — and underneath the arithmetic, faster than words, the thing that actually moves his mouth: *that car goes through that gate.*

An escaped prisoner walks into a provincial prison from the front, in the daylight, with somebody holding the door.

The Airing is the account he wrote afterwards, set down as forty numbered findings. It is the record of nine days in a building where nobody says no — where a wall is painted the morning he arrives, where last year's blankets are locked in a store against next year's inspection, where a library of eleven hundred books has four entries in its borrowing register, and where a man may ask for anything at all, including a grape, in the middle of the afternoon, out of season, and receive it in ninety minutes.

And it is the record of the first coat he has ever worn that could not do any good.

A cleric can bless a kitchen. A doctor can put a woman in a car at eleven at night. A teacher can condemn a stove and forty children are warm for thirty years.

An inspector can close a wing and end a career. He cannot open one door, issue one blanket, or shorten one sentence by an hour.

THE STANDING

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

The first was a burglar in Tehran, for twenty-seven years, on roofs and second-storey windows. I was patient and I was vain about being patient. I worked Thursday nights and only Thursday nights, because Thursday night in this country the whole family is at somebody's mother's house, and I would not work Fridays, because I did not believe in God and saw no need to be rude to Him. A man in Block Three called me Panjshanbeh for it and died before I could tell him it had stuck.

I was caught once, and of the twelve years I was given I served four.

The second was a sayyid.

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, and I found that out three hours later on a bus, from a driver who would not take my fare and kissed my hand.

I meant to be over a border in twelve days. I was the custodian of a shrine in a salt town at the end of a road for fourteen months. What I left there: a woman who knew exactly what I was and never said; a boy of nineteen building a life on something I told him; and a statement in my own hand certifying that no trace could be found of a man called Nader Fani. What I took: a pair of shoes half a size too big, and one line out of a pilgrim register from 1357 that I have not been able to put down.

The third was a doctor.

There was a bag on a luggage rack and nobody under it, and in the bag a stethoscope, a blood-pressure cuff mended with electrical

tape, and a Ministry of Health card belonging to a man born eleven months before me. I got off a bus in a village of four hundred people on a dying qanat, and they had been promised a locum eleven months earlier and had stopped expecting one, and a man outside the shop stood up and said *Doctor? They said Thursday*.

I was there fourteen weeks. A woman lived who would not have. A boy of nine died who might not have. I forged eleven months of a broken man's professional life in one night and walked out before it was light.

The fourth was a teacher, and it is the only one I would do again.

I went north-west because it was the only direction I had not used, and in the second week of Azar the pass shut behind me and did not open until Farvardin. Two hundred people in a gorge. A school with two rooms and forty children across six grades and no teacher since Mehr, and a man in the shop who had been carrying the keys in his coat for eleven weeks and was tired of having them in his coat.

I cannot read. Not properly; not a page, not aloud. So I made forty children read to me instead, and it was the best teaching any of them ever had, and it was the best teaching any of them ever had because I could not check a single word of it.

I came out of there with a heater condemned on a form I invented, a boy's exercise book with thirty-one names crossed out in the back, and a folded page with a name on it written four times.

That is what has brought me here.

The man who wrote it down told me two things standing beside a truck. The first told me who. The second was that he is still alive and not far from where I was going. Then he put his hand on my arm, which he had never done, and said: *do not go straight there*.

So I have not gone straight there. I have been in this town nine weeks doing nothing at all, which I am extremely good at, and I have not once been noticed.

I am forty-seven. I have no passport, no bank account and no papers in my own name. I am wanted in three provinces under one

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 still have not read it. I have had it from a man at the top of a well who had it wrong, and from a schoolmaster who had it right, and I passed it on to a class of children and got it wrong anyway, and a girl of nine stood up and corrected me out of the book.

There is a hawk in it who will not go. He sits on the king's wrist with a hood over his eyes and he is fed by hand, and he says he already has a king and does not see the point of another.

I thought that one was the sensible bird.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Cheshm means eye. As an answer it is the short form of upon my eye — it is yours, it is done, I place it on my eye — and it is said several hundred million times a day in this country, and it is the most misunderstood word we have.

It is not servility and it is not politeness, though it is polite. It is the complete and correct response of a person who has been asked for something by a person they are not in a position to refuse. It contains no information whatsoever about whether the thing will happen, because that question was never on the table. What was on the table was the relative position of the two people, and *cheshm* settles it instantly and gracefully and closes it.

Which means it is not a lie. It says, precisely and truthfully, *I am not in a position to say anything else to you*. The dishonesty is not in the word; it is in the arrangement that requires it, and everybody standing in the arrangement can see that, and *cheshm* is the sound of two people agreeing not to mention it.

I wanted to write a book in which a man walks into a building and nobody says no to him for nine days, and I wanted it to be funny for eight chapters and then to stop being funny. The grape is not an exaggeration. I have watched men produce far stranger things far faster, and every one of them had done the same sum: the cost of the grape is a great deal lower than the cost of finding out what happens when you refuse.

The other thing this book is about is that an inspector's power is entirely negative.

This seems to me the least discussed fact about the way institutions actually work, in any country. The person sent to find out what is wrong is structurally incapable of putting anything right. He can subtract — a career, a wing, a pension. He cannot add one blanket. And so the only route by which a genuine wrong gets corrected runs through the destruction of a specific named individual, and the machinery moves with astonishing speed to protect itself from that

individual's failure, and the wrong may be fixed on the way past.

A report describing a condition goes into a tray. A report naming a person moves. I did not invent that and I would be glad to be shown that it is not true.

A word on the smoke, since this is the fourth of these books to have one.

Teriak is opium, and there is a generation in this country for whom it is not a drug at all. It is what a grandfather takes for his knees, kept in a small tin in a cloth on a shelf in a house where nobody would dream of touching alcohol. It is for the pain, and the pain is usually genuine and usually a joint. In certain houses it is brought out for a guest the way tea is, and declining is not a moral position, it is a social event.

The first three of these books each had a substance that told the narrator something — a voice in smoke, a correction in bad air, his own mother sitting on a floor. This one deliberately does not. Opium is not a visionary drug and I have not written it as one. It produces detachment: complete lucidity and no weight. Everything you were carrying is still in the room, in colour, and none of it is on you.

That is the valley this book is standing in, and I wanted the reader to notice that it is the only one of the four that is not frightening, and to be more careful about it for exactly that reason.

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

Chew Z

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PART ONE — THE CAR

Findings One to Eight

1.

Nine weeks of doing nothing is a skill, and nobody will ever pay for it.

In the salt town I wrote you lessons. In the clinic I wrote you notes. In the gorge I wrote you questions, and I said at the time that it was the first honest heading I had managed, and I stand by that.

These are findings.

That is what an inspector writes. He does not teach and he does not treat and he does not ask; he attends, and he observes, and he sets down what he has found in a numbered list, and the list goes into a building where he will never see it again, and something happens to somebody.

I have written one real report in my life. It is the worst thing I have ever done and it is at the end of this and I am not going to pretend otherwise for two hundred pages.

Now. The town.

I got there in the middle of Ordibehesht with a folded page in my coat and an instruction not to go straight there, and I did as I was told, and I would like to be clear that I did as I was told for the worst possible reason.

An old man told me not to go straight there and I heard *be careful*.

He did not mean be careful. I know what he meant now.

So I took a room above a tyre place at the eastern end, for eleven days at first and then by the month, and I sat in that town for nine weeks doing absolutely nothing.

I want to describe the nothing, because it is the only genuine professional skill I have left and nobody has ever once asked me about it.

You do not hide in a town. That is the mistake. A man who hides is a man behaving in a way that is different from everybody else, and difference is the only thing a place actually notices. What you do is *acquire a shape. You want to be a thing the town has a slot for, and every town in this country has four or five spare slots lying around,*

and the largest of them is a man from somewhere else who is waiting for something.

So I was that. I had tea at the same place at the same time. I bought bread. I complained about the price of bread, correctly, with the right numbers, which is the national passport. I told a man in a shop that I was waiting on a matter with a piece of land in Zanzibar, which is the finest cover story ever devised, because it is boring, it is plausible, it is unfalsifiable, and everybody in Iran either has one or has an uncle who does.

Nine weeks. Nobody looked at me twice. By the fifth week two separate people were asking me how the land was going.

The land was going badly. I said so with feeling.

And every day I did one hour of the only work I actually came for, which was to walk past the prison.

There is a prison on the western edge of that town. Everybody in the province knows this and nobody in the town discusses it, in the way that a family does not discuss the room the grandfather is in. It is a long grey wall and a gate and two towers and a car park with eleven cars in it, and I walked past it four hundred and some times in nine weeks and never once looked at it directly, and I could draw you the whole approach now with my eyes shut.

I did not know he was in it.

I want that on the record before we go any further, because everything I did afterwards has been described to me as a plan and it was not a plan. I had a name on a folded page and an instruction, and I had established that the man was in that town, and I had assumed — because I am a fool, and because assumption is the only thing that has ever caught me — that a seventy-four-year-old man living in a town lives in a house.

He was four hundred metres from my tea for nine weeks.

2.

A driver sent to the wrong guesthouse is still a driver.

There is one guesthouse in that town and it is called the Tourist, which is a joke that nobody has ever laughed at, and it is eleven metres from the place I had tea every morning at ten past eight.

On a Tuesday in the third week of Tir a car came up the street at twenty to nine and stopped outside it, and a man of about thirty got out in a shirt with no tie and a lanyard and went in.

I watched him go in because I watch everything.

He came out ninety seconds later looking annoyed, and stood by the car, and made a telephone call, and did not get an answer, and made another one, and did not get an answer to that either, and I want you to hold onto the two unanswered calls because they are the whole of my defence and they are not much of one.

Then he looked up the street.

There were four people in that street. A woman with a child. A man unloading crates who was facing away. A boy on a bicycle.

And a man of forty-seven sitting outside a tea place at twenty to nine in the morning in a clean grey jacket, alone, with nothing in front of him, evidently waiting for something.

I had spent nine weeks constructing exactly one impression and I had constructed it perfectly.

He came over and said, "Aqa-ye bāzras [baaz-RAS]?"

Mr Inspector.

Now.

I have had four seconds like this before. On a bus in Khorasan a driver kissed my hand and I had four seconds. At the top of a road in a salt town nine men came out of the dark and I had four seconds. In a shop in a gorge a man put four keys on a counter and said *can you read*, and I had four seconds and used them badly.

I want to tell you what happened in these four, and it is not what happened in the other three, and this is the reason this is the worst book of the four.

In the salt town I said nothing because I was terrified. In the clinic I said nothing because a man in a shop had already answered for me. In the gorge I said yes because I wanted to be warm.

Here I did the arithmetic.

Four seconds, and I ran it like a stairwell. *He has an inspection to deliver and no inspector. He has made two calls that were not answered. If he goes back without one, that is on him and not on the man who did not turn up. He is thirty and he is frightened of somebody. He will not check anything, because checking is how you find out that you have made a mistake, and nobody in the history of this country has ever gone looking for that.*

And underneath it, faster than the words, the thing that actually moved my mouth:

That car goes through that gate.

I said, "You're late."

He apologised for eleven minutes.

3.

The gate.

I have been through a great many doors that were not mine. I have never in my life walked towards one from the front, in the daylight, with somebody holding it open.

The car park. The barrier. A hand out of a window taking a paper and giving it back. The inner gate, which is the one that matters, because an outer gate is a formality and an inner gate is the actual line and every man who has ever been through one knows the difference in his stomach.

I want to set out my physical condition, because I have never been able to describe it properly and I am going to try once more.

I was not afraid.

That is the thing. Fear I know. Fear is a stairwell at two in the morning and it is manageable and in some ways I have missed it. This was something else and I have only ever met it in that car park, and the closest I can get is that *my body did not believe the arithmetic*.

I had run it correctly. I knew — I knew with total professional confidence — that a man in a suit arriving in an official car with a driver and a lanyard is invisible in this country, that nobody checks, that the checking has already been done by the fact of the car. That is not optimism. It is how it works. I have been on the receiving end of that principle from the wrong side of it for twenty-seven years.

And my hands would not do what I told them for about eleven minutes.

There were eight men on that gate over the two barriers and I looked at every one of them. Not for recognition — for the *other* thing, which is that I have been in a room with perhaps four hundred officers in four years at Vakilabad and any one of them could be anywhere, and prisons move staff the way the sea moves sand.

I put the chances at somewhere under one in fifty. I have done worse arithmetic on worse odds and gone through the window anyway.

But there is a difference between one in fifty and one in fifty when the cost is twelve years and the eight remaining, and I stood in a car park in Ordibehesht doing that sum with a lanyard round my neck that had somebody else's department on it, and I understood something that I have not got past since.

I did not do it for the old man.

I want that written down. I told myself in the car that I was doing it to get to Nemat Sohrabi and that is not true, because I did not know he was in there. I found that out on the second morning off a list on a desk.

I got in that car because a man said *Aqa-ye bāzras* and something in me stood up.

Four books. Four coats. And the honest sentence, arrived at in a prison car park at forty-seven years of age, is that I am a man who cannot decline.

4.

Everybody knew I was coming except me.

The wall on the left of the administration corridor had been painted that morning.

I knew it before I touched it. You know a wall that has been painted that morning the way you know a room somebody has just left; it is the smell and it is also that the skirting is clean, and skirting is never clean.

They had painted one wall. Not the corridor. *The wall you see from the governor's door.*

And I leaned on it.

I did it deliberately, at the end of a sentence, the way a man leans on a wall, and I felt it go through the shoulder of the jacket and I did not move, and I stood there for the remainder of a four-minute conversation about the water supply with my shoulder in wet paint.

I would like to claim strategy. It was not strategy. I leaned on it because I had run out of things to do with my body and I was in a prison.

The stripe was there for four days.

Nobody mentioned it.

Four separate men decided not to mention it and I watched every one of them decide. The driver saw it in the car and looked away. A senior officer saw it, and his eyes went to it twice, and the second time he moved himself so that he was on my other side. A clerk saw it and became so extremely interested in a folder that I nearly laughed. And Kani saw it within eleven seconds of my walking into his office and did not so much as blink, and I sat opposite that man for four days with a white stripe down my shoulder and he never once let his eyes go to it, and I have thought about the discipline of that with something close to admiration.

Here is what I understood, standing in a corridor with wet paint on me.

They painted one wall.

Not for me. They do not know me. They painted it for the *category* — for the thing that arrives in a car with a lanyard — and they painted the one wall that thing would see, and everybody in that building had known the date for three weeks, and the entire apparatus of the institution had been arranged, over twenty-one days, into the shape of a photograph.

In a mosque in a salt town two hundred and forty people listened to a posture rather than a text.

In a clinic four hundred people measured a needle rather than a cure.

In a school forty children were inspected for fingernails at ten past seven in the morning in the snow.

And here, in the fourth building, a state institution had spent three weeks and an amount of paint on the wall that would be behind me while somebody said *cheshm*.

It is one job. I have said this before and nobody believed me and I did not entirely believe myself, and I would now like to enter it as a finding.

There is one job in the world and every institution is a different set of clothes for it, and I have now worn four of them, and not one has required me to know a single thing.

5.

I have sat in this room before, on the other chair.

Sarhang Bahador Kani [ba-haa-DOR KAA-nee] was fifty-five and had run that prison for six years, and I liked him inside ninety seconds, which was extremely inconvenient and remains so.

He came round the desk to shake my hand. That is the tell and it is the only one you need. A man who is comfortable stays behind his desk and makes you come to him; a man who comes round it is

telling you that he is not certain of his ground and has decided to be liked instead.

He had a good face gone heavy. He had a photograph of three children on the shelf behind him and one of them was in uniform. He had, on the wall, a framed certificate of something and it was hanging four centimetres too low, which meant he had hung it himself, which meant he had wanted it up and had not asked anybody to do it.

I sat down opposite him.

And I want to tell you about the chair, because it is the whole of that first hour and I have never said it out loud.

I have been in a governor's office before.

Twice, in four years, at Vakilabad, in the other chair — the one with no arms, which is not an accident and which every governor's office in the world has, because a chair with no arms gives a man nowhere to put his hands and a man with nowhere to put his hands talks.

I sat in the good chair and looked across a desk at a frightened man of fifty-five and my body was in the other one. Physically. The whole hour. My hands kept going to arms that were there and I kept being surprised by them.

He talked for forty minutes.

Not about the prison. About the *province*: the allocation, the road, the difficulty of getting staff, his predecessor, a matter concerning the water. It is the oldest defensive manoeuvre there is and I have watched a hundred men do it in doorways at two in the morning — you talk, and you keep talking, and you make it socially impossible for the other man to open with a question.

I let him do it.

That is the only skill I brought into that building and it is the same one I brought into a mosque and a clinic and a school: I can wait longer than the room can.

At about forty minutes he ran out and there was a silence, and I did nothing with it, and it went on, and in the eleventh second of it he

said — and I have never forgotten the shape of the sentence, because a man does not build a sentence like this unless he has been building it for three weeks —

“You will find things. I want to say before you begin that you will find things, and that I know what they are, and that I would rather you found them from me.”

And I said, “Then tell me one.”

He said, “The drain.”

And then he looked as though he had put something down that he had been carrying up a flight of stairs.

I had no idea what he was talking about. I made a small note on a pad in handwriting nobody can read, including me, and said we would come to it.

6.

The library.

They showed me the library on the first afternoon and it was the proudest forty minutes of somebody’s year.

Eleven hundred books. That is a real number; it was on a board on the wall, hand-painted, with the eleven hundred in a slightly different colour from the rest, which means somebody repainted the number when it went up.

It is a good room. I want to be fair, because what I did in it was not fair. Two windows, decent shelving, a table with six chairs, and a man of about sixty in charge of it who had been in charge of it for nine years and who took me round the sections one at a time.

He had arranged them himself. There was a shelf of poetry that had clearly been assembled by a person rather than delivered by a ministry.

And I asked to see the borrowing register.

I want to be honest about why I asked, because two people have since told me it was clever and it was not clever, it was *habit*. You ask for the register. You always ask for the register. In a shrine you

ask for the pilgrim book and in a clinic you ask for the drug ledger and in a school you ask for the attendance, and you do it because a building will tell you anything and its books will tell you the truth, and I have been reading other people's books upside down off desks since I was nineteen.

He got it out immediately. *Cheshm*. Of course. He was pleased to be asked.

Four.

Not four this year. *Four entries in the register*, in nine years, and the last of them in 1399, and one of the four was the librarian himself.

I sat with that book open in front of me in a room with eleven hundred books in it and a man standing beside me who had spent nine years arranging them by hand, and I understood four things in about a second and a half:

That the men on that wing cannot come here without an escort, and that an escort is one officer for one prisoner, and that there is no wing in that building with a spare officer.

That the room is therefore not a library. It is a *photograph of a library, and it has been photographed by every inspector for nine years, and every one of them wrote down* library: eleven hundred volumes and moved on.

That the librarian knows this. Obviously he knows this. He has known it for nine years and he goes on arranging the poetry by hand.

And that I was the first person in nine years to open the register, and that by opening it I had converted his life's one dignified thing into a *finding*.

He did not say anything. He put the register back on the shelf where it lived.

And that was the first cruel thing I did in that building and I want it noted that I did not intend it, and I want it noted immediately afterwards that not intending it is worth precisely nothing, and that I would go on to do considerably worse on purpose.

7.

Say the word and watch the room.

On the first evening, at the end of the tour, in a corridor, with four men present, I said something I meant kindly.

I said that there was no need for *cheshm* — that I would rather be told when a thing was not possible, because a report built on things that are not possible helps nobody.

There was a small pause.

And then the senior officer said, “Cheshm.”

And I looked at him, and he looked back at me with complete sincerity and no irony whatsoever, and I understood that he had not heard a word I said. Not because he was stupid — he was not stupid, he was one of the two or three sharpest people in that building. Because what I had said was *not available*. It did not correspond to any sentence that can be said by a man in his position to a man in mine, and so it had arrived and found nowhere to go and the only thing that could come back was the thing that always comes back.

I want to explain the word properly for anyone who has not lived inside it, because everything in this book runs on it.

Cheshm [CHESHM] means eye. That is all it means. As an answer it is the short form of upon my eye — it is yours, it is done, I place it on my eye — and it is the standard, correct, universal reply of a person of lower standing to a person of higher standing in this country, and it is said perhaps four hundred million times a day.

It means: *at once*.

It also means: *I have heard you and this conversation is now over*.

It also means: *no*.

And the extraordinary thing, the thing I did not fully understand until the fourth day, is that these are not three different uses. They are one use. *It is the same word for all three because the whole point of it is that you cannot tell. A man says cheshm and you have received the entire content of his position, which is that he is not in*

a position to say anything else, and what he actually intends to do about it is a separate matter that has not been raised and will not be.

I have used it myself all my life. I said it to my father. I said it in Vakilabad four hundred times.

I had simply never before been on the receiving end of it, continuously, from every human being in a building, for four days.

That evening I wrote in the pad: *nobody has said no to me.*

I did not mean anything by it. It was an observation of the kind I have been making since I was seventeen.

I did not know I had just started something.

8.

I came here for a name, and the name was on a desk.

The wing lists are on the wall of the duty office in a frame with a glass front, one sheet per band, and they are updated in pencil.

I read Band Three upside down from four feet away while a man was telling me about the plumbing.

You learn this in a bank of a certain kind, and in the back office of a carpet shop, and it is not difficult; it is simply that people do not believe you can do it and therefore do not turn the paper over. Upside-down reading is slow. My reading is slow anyway. The two conditions cancel and I am, as it happens, no worse at it than the right way up, which is one of the very few advantages of being what I am.

Forty-one names in Band Three.

And the fourteenth one down was *Sohrabi, Nemat*, and beside it a number, and beside that a date, and the date was 1394.

I have been asked what I felt.

Nothing at all. I want that on the record because everybody expects otherwise. I was in the middle of a conversation about a stack pipe and I went on having it, and I asked two more questions about the stack pipe, and one of them was quite good.

The feeling arrived about ninety minutes later in a corridor and it was not what I expected either.

It was not triumph and it was not dread.

It was: *I have been walking past him for nine weeks.*

Four hundred metres, four hundred-odd times, at the same hour, drinking tea in a street with a wall at the end of it. He was inside that wall the entire time. And an old man in a gorge three provinces away told me not to go straight there, and I obeyed him for the wrong reason, and the wrong reason kept me in that town for nine weeks doing nothing, and the nine weeks of doing nothing are the only reason a driver at twenty to nine on a Tuesday looked up a street and saw a man who was obviously waiting for something.

If I had gone straight there I would have gone to a house that does not exist and left in a week.

I have turned this over for twenty years. There are two ways to hold it and I have never been able to keep either one for longer than about a month.

The first is that a seventy-four-year-old schoolmaster in a village with no road told me to wait because he knew exactly where Nemat Sohrabi was and knew exactly what would have happened if I had walked up to that gate and asked, and that everything that followed was a thing he arranged from three hundred kilometres away with one sentence and a hand on my arm.

The second is that he said a normal thing to a man he was worried about, and I did as I was told, and the rest is a driver, a wrong guesthouse, and two telephone calls that were not answered.

I do not know which. I have never known which.

And the man is dead now and I could not have asked him anyway, because I have never in my life asked anybody the question I actually wanted answered.

PART TWO — CHESHM

Findings Nine to Seventeen

9.

Nobody has said no to me in three days.

By the Thursday morning of the first week I had counted.

I have counted things all my life and I have told you why: six hundred doors, eighty apologies, four hundred thousand tomons, eleven weeks, forty names, four men. It is not a virtue. It is the only thing my head does on its own.

Three days. I had asked for, requested, mentioned, or vaguely gestured at somewhere in the region of sixty things.

Sixty *cheshm*.

Not fifty-eight and two polite refusals. Not fifty-nine and one *that may be difficult*. Sixty, and I had been listening for the exception the way you listen for a lock, and there was no exception.

So on the Thursday I did the thing that ruins my life at intervals of about four years, which is that I stopped observing and started *testing*.

I want to be clear that I knew this was wrong while I was doing it. It is not a defence, it is the opposite of a defence; a man who does not know is a fool and a man who knows is something else. I stood in a corridor on the fourth morning of an inspection I was not qualified to conduct and thought: *I am going to find the edge of this*.

I want to know where *no* lives in this building.

Everybody in the world has a no. My mother had one and she used it perhaps four times in her life and I remember all four. A man in a stairwell in Karaj had one. Every crew I ever worked with had a point past which the answer changed, and finding that point in another man is the entire craft of my trade, because a man's no tells you what he is actually protecting, and what he is protecting tells you where it is.

Four days in that prison I looked for it in about ninety people.

And I want to put the conclusion here at the front, before the funny part, because the funny part is going to run for eight chapters and I do not want you to arrive at the end of it and think it was a joke.

I never found it.

Not once. Not in a single human being in that institution, at any level, on any subject, in four days.

And the reason is not that they are servile and it is not that they are frightened, although some of them were both. The reason is that in an institution of that kind, *no* is not a thing a person is permitted to own. It has been removed from them, at every level, all the way up — Kani has no *no* either, he says *cheshm* to the province exactly as the wing officer says it to him — and what is left in the space where it used to be is a word that costs nothing and commits to nothing and closes the conversation, and everybody uses it, and the building runs on it, and nothing whatsoever gets fixed.

I did not know that on the Thursday.

On the Thursday I thought I had found a game.

10.

Where does the drain go?

Kani had given it to me himself on the first afternoon, which is why I asked, and it took four men and most of a morning and it was the single funniest and worst thing in that building.

The exercise yard of that prison has a drain in the corner. It is a metal grating about the size of a door, in a dished part of the concrete, and it takes the rain off two thousand square metres of yard and whatever else goes into it, and I asked, standing beside it with three officers, where it went.

There was a silence of a very particular quality.

Then the senior of the three said, “Cheshm.”

I said that *cheshm* was not an answer to a question of fact.

He said, “Cheshm,” and sent a man.

The man came back with another man. The second man was from maintenance and had been there nineteen years and he said, with total confidence, that it went to the main.

I asked which main.

He said the main.

I asked whether he had ever seen it.

And this is where it opened up, because he was an honest man and he thought about it properly and then he said, "No."

One. I had one. Three days and I had a no, out of a man in overalls, about a pipe. I could have kissed him.

Then he added, "Nobody has. It was done before the wall."

Now.

The wall was rebuilt in 1371. The drain is older than the wall. Which means the drain is from the original building, which was a barracks of some kind, and the plan for it — if there ever was one, and this is a country in which there is always a plan and it is always in a building that has been demolished — does not exist.

So over the course of about three hours, four men and I established the following:

That the yard drain has been running for something over fifty years. That nobody currently alive in that institution knows where it goes. That when it backs up, which it does in Azar and Dey, they lift the grating and put a hose down it and it clears, and that this is the entire body of institutional knowledge on the subject.

And that somewhere under a prison in the north-west of this country there is either a functioning nineteenth-century culvert or a very large hole full of fifty years of everything.

Kani knew. That is the thing. He had told me on the first afternoon, in a sentence he had been building for three weeks, and what he had said was *the drain*, and I had written a note and thought he was confessing to something.

He was not confessing. He was *handing me the thing he could not get fixed*.

He had written to the province about that drain — I found this later — four times. Four requests. One recipient. Four trays.

He gave it to a man with a clipboard because a man with a clipboard is the only mechanism in this country by which a fact can be made to move upward, and he had three weeks' notice, and he had spent them deciding which of his problems to hand to the inspector, and he chose the one that could kill somebody rather than the one that could kill his career.

I did not understand any of that until the third week.

On the Thursday I stood by a drain and thought I had won something.

11.

What is behind the door with the good lock?

There is one interior door in that administration block with a good lock on it.

I saw it on the first morning. I want to explain why this is the loudest object in any state building in the world, and it is not subtle and any burglar will tell you the same thing.

An institution buys locks in a job lot. Every interior door in that corridor had the same handle and the same cheap five-lever mortice, because they were fitted at the same time by the same contractor at the same price, and eleven of them did not quite shut properly, which is also normal.

And one door had a *different lock*. A good one. Newer. Bought by an individual, with intention, and fitted.

Nobody puts a good lock on an interior door in a building where they do not own anything unless there is something behind it that they are personally responsible for.

I asked what was behind it.

Cheshm.

They opened it on the Friday morning, with a key that came from a drawer in a different room, held by a man who had to be sent for,

and I want you to have the four of us standing in that corridor waiting for the key, in silence, for eleven minutes.

Inside: the inspection.

Last year's.

Two hundred and forty new blankets, in plastic, stacked. Eleven cartons of soap. A quantity of crockery. Four boxes of textbooks for a literacy class. A hot water urn, still in the box. And on a shelf, in a row, nine table lamps.

All of it bought in the three weeks before the inspection of the previous year. All of it inspected. All of it written down. And all of it put in a room the following week and locked with a good lock, because it had been bought against a budget line for an inspection, and issuing it would mean it was gone, and if it was gone it could not be shown to the *next* inspector.

They were saving it. For me.

They had not got it out for me because they had bought new things for me, and the new things were now also going to go in that room in about a week, and there were nine table lamps in there and I have never established what the lamps were for.

I stood in that store and laughed. I could not help it. It came out of me and I had to turn it into a cough and nobody in that corridor was fooled for a second.

And then the man with the key said, quietly, not defensively, in the tone of somebody stating a professional fact:

"If we issue them, next year the line will be cut. They will say we have blankets."

Which is correct. That is exactly what would happen and everybody in that corridor knew it and I knew it and it is the same arithmetic as a village keeping a broken doctor because reporting him closes the clinic.

Two hundred and forty blankets in plastic, in a locked room, in Dey, in a prison in the north-west of this country, being kept warm for the budget.

12.

Which officers work Thursdays?

That one frightened somebody.

I asked it in the duty office on the Saturday, off the roster board, and I asked it because I have been thinking about Thursdays since I was seventeen years old.

Thursday is the short day. The week here runs Saturday to Thursday and Thursday finishes at lunch, and Friday is nothing, and what that means in any institution in this country is that from about eleven on a Thursday morning until Saturday morning a building is running on the smallest number of people it can legally be run on.

I did not work Thursdays because it was clever. I worked Thursdays because everybody is at somebody's mother's house. But the professional consequence is identical and I have known it in my hands for thirty years: *the world is thin on a Thursday*.

So I said, conversationally, looking at the board: who is on over Thursday and Friday.

And the room changed.

Not dramatically. I want to be accurate, because I have seen rooms change dramatically and this was not that. A man who was writing carried on writing but stopped moving his other hand. Somebody looked at somebody. The duty officer answered the question completely and correctly and gave me four names and a shift pattern and did it slightly too fast.

Four days, sixty-odd requests, ninety people, and one question moved a room.

I made a note. I made it in the handwriting nobody can read and I underlined it, which I have done perhaps six times in my life.

And then I did the thing I am worst at, which is that I did not follow it up.

I had a drain and a locked room and eleven hundred books and a governor handing me his problems in a sentence he had built for

three weeks, and I had the old man in Band Three four hundred metres from where I had been drinking tea for nine weeks, and I put *Thursdays* in the pad and went to look at the kitchen.

It is in Finding Thirty-Four. That is where it is. I want you to know now that I had it on the Saturday of the first week, underlined, and that everything that happened afterwards was available to me for eleven days and I was looking at a drain.

13.

I would like to sit in the visiting room. In the other chair.

The visiting room is a long room divided by a counter with a screen over it, and there are eleven positions, and each position has two chairs.

They are not the same chair.

Nobody notices this. I have asked four people since and none of them had ever thought about it. On the visitor's side the chair is a plastic stacking chair, of the kind that is in every waiting room in this country, and it has a back that you can lean against.

On the prisoner's side it is a stool. Fixed to the floor.

There is a reason and the reason is security and the reason is perfectly good. A stool cannot be picked up and a fixed stool cannot be moved, and I am not going to stand here and tell you that a man who has done four years does not understand why the furniture is bolted down.

But there is a second thing, which is not security, and which nobody designed, and which is simply what happens when you put a man on a backless stool opposite his mother in a chair.

He cannot rest.

For the whole of the visit. Twenty minutes, thirty, whatever the allowance is that year. His mother can sit back. He cannot, and so his body is doing work the entire time, and at about eleven minutes it begins to show, and what it looks like from the other side of a screen is a man who wants to leave.

I know what that looks like from both sides. That is my whole contribution.

So I said I would like to sit in the visiting room, and they said *cheshm*, and we went, and then I said I would like to sit on the other side.

There was a pause that I would put at four seconds.

Then *cheshm*, and a man went round the end of the counter and unlocked the door on the far side, and I walked round through the internal corridor — which takes ninety seconds and is a different route entirely, and I want you to hold onto that, because a visitor walks eleven metres and a prisoner walks ninety seconds — and I sat down on the stool.

Three officers stood on the other side and looked at me through the screen.

I sat there for eleven minutes.

Nobody said a word for eleven minutes. I did not explain and they did not ask, and I have thought a great deal since about what those three men believed was happening, and the only answer I have is that they believed a man from the province was conducting a procedure of some kind that they had not been told about, and that the correct response was to stand still.

What was actually happening is that a man of forty-seven who had done four years at Vakilabad was sitting on a fixed stool in a visiting room finding out what his ex-wife had been looking at in 2022.

She came twice. The second time was in Bahman and it was eleven minutes long and she left early.

I had spent three years telling myself she left early because she had somewhere to be.

I sat on that stool for eleven minutes with three officers watching me and worked out, at forty-seven, with a lanyard round my neck, that she left early because I looked like a man who wanted to leave, and that I had looked like a man who wanted to leave because I was sitting on a stool.

Then I stood up and said the ventilation in there needed looking at. And the senior officer said, "Cheshm."

14.

The three coached men.

They produced three prisoners for me on the Sunday and I have rarely been more embarrassed on behalf of a room.

I want to be fair to whoever set it up, because they had a genuinely difficult problem. An inspection has to include prisoners. It cannot be all drains and blankets; there has to be a section in the report about the men, and the man writing the report has to have spoken to some.

So somebody selects three. And whoever selects them is not a monster, he is a middle-ranking officer with a career, and he selects three men who are (a) articulate, (b) near the end of their sentence and therefore with something to lose, and (c) told.

The first one was very good. Genuinely. He talked about the classes and the food and the medical and he did it with a warmth that was not entirely manufactured, and he was, I would say, about sixty per cent sincere, which is a high figure and I would have taken it in most rooms.

The second one had decided to be funny about it, which was a serious error, and made a joke about the food being better than his wife's, and there was a small horrible silence in which everybody in that room including him understood that he had gone off the sheet.

The third one said his line twice.

Not a stumble. He got to the end of it — something about the workshop, and the opportunity, and being able to send money — and then he stopped, and looked at the officer by the door, and then said the whole thing again from the beginning, word for word, in exactly the same rhythm.

Nobody moved.

And I let him.

I let him get all the way through it a second time, and then I said thank you, and I used his name, which I had read off the list an hour earlier, and I asked him how long he had left, and he said fourteen months, and I said that was a hard number because it is too long to count and too short to settle into, and he said yes, and something went across his face.

Then he went out.

Here is what I want to say about those three men, and it is the only thing I have ever wanted to say about them.

Every one of them did their job perfectly.

They were told what to say and they said it, because the alternative is a transfer or a lost furlough or a file that stops moving, and there is no version of that room in which a prisoner tells the truth to a man with a lanyard, and anybody who thinks otherwise has never been in the room from either side.

The failure was not theirs. The failure is that the procedure requires a conversation that cannot exist, and everybody in the building knows it cannot exist, and it happens every year, and every year somebody writes *prisoners interviewed: three* and that sentence goes into a file in a city.

I wrote it too. It is Finding Fourteen of the real report and it says exactly that, and it is the only line in the whole document that anybody ever complimented me on.

15.

A grape.

I would like to record that I am not proud of this and that I did it anyway and that I would probably do it again.

By the Monday of the second week I had stopped looking for the edge in serious things and started looking for it in absurd ones, on the reasoning — which was rubbish, and which I knew was rubbish — that a system's true limit is best found at the ridiculous end.

So over about six hours I asked for:

A copy of the founding decree of the institution. Produced in forty minutes. It exists. It is from 1345 and it is beautiful and nobody had looked at it since 1381.

The name of the contractor who rebuilt the wall in 1371. Produced in an afternoon by a man who telephoned his uncle.

A working torch. Nine minutes. It was, I am fairly confident, the officer's own, out of his own car.

The number of steps between the gate and the medical room. I asked this to be difficult. A young officer counted them, personally, twice, and came back and gave me a figure and then said he had counted twice and got two different numbers and had taken the second one and would I like him to do it a third time.

I said no.

He said, "Cheshm."

And then, at about four in the afternoon, in the governor's office, with Kani present, and out of nothing but a kind of despair that had been building for two days, I said that I would very much like a grape.

Not grapes. *A grape.* Singular. In the middle of the afternoon, in the north-west of this country, out of season, inside a prison.

There was no pause at all.

The officer at the door said, "Cheshm," and went out.

Ninety minutes later a plate came in with a small bunch of grapes on it, washed, on a paper napkin, and everybody in the room watched me eat one, and Kani said, "Are they all right?"

And I said they were very good.

And they were. They were extremely good grapes and I do not know where they came from and I have never found out and I have thought about the man who was sent for them at four in the afternoon more times than I have thought about the drain.

I stopped after the grape.

Not because I felt bad, although I did. Because I understood on the way back to the guesthouse that I had not been testing a system. *I*

had been standing on a lot of people's necks to see how far down the floor was, and the answer is that there is no floor, and that the reason there is no floor is not that they are weak.

It is that every one of them had worked out, correctly, in about a second, that the cost of one grape is a great deal lower than the cost of finding out what a man from the province does when he is refused.

They were not obeying me. They were *pricing* me.

And they had priced me exactly right, because I was a fraud with a lanyard and nothing in my hand but a pad, and the only power I had in that building was the power to be displeased, and every single person in it had understood that before I did.

16.

Cheshm is not agreement. It is a door closing very politely.

I want to set this down properly because it is the finding this whole book is named for, in a manner of speaking, and because I have spent twenty years trying to explain it to people who did not grow up here and have never once got it across.

Cheshm is not servility. Anybody who tells you it is has understood nothing.

It is not politeness either, although it is polite. And it is emphatically not agreement, and the single most expensive mistake a foreigner can make in this country — and I have watched it made — is to hear *cheshm* and write down *yes*.

Here is what it actually is.

It is the correct and complete response of a person who has been asked for something by a person they are not in a position to refuse. That is the whole definition. It contains no information about whether the thing will happen, because *the question of whether the thing will happen was never on the table. What was on the table was the relative position of the two people, and cheshm* settles that, immediately and gracefully, and closes it.

Which means the word is not a lie. This is the part people get wrong. It is entirely honest — it says, precisely and truthfully, *I am not in a position to say anything else to you*, and it says it in one syllable, and both parties know it.

The dishonesty is not in the word. The dishonesty is in the arrangement that requires it, and everybody standing in the arrangement can see that, and *cheshm* is the sound of two people agreeing not to mention it.

And now the part that concerns me.

I have spent four years walking into institutions in other men's clothes, and in every single one of them there has been a version of this word, and I have used every one of them.

In a mosque it is eleven seconds of silence, and the room fills it with whatever it brought, and nobody can ever say the man at the front said anything.

In a clinic it is the ampoule. The needle goes in and the procedure has been performed and the question of whether it was the right procedure is not on the table and was never on the table.

In a school it is *hefz* — forty lines of Ferdowsi recited perfectly by a child who does not know what a word of it means, and a teacher who cannot read nodding at the fourth line.

And in a prison it is *cheshm*.

They are the same object. I have now handled four of them. It is a device by which two people can transact without either of them having to produce the thing that is actually being asked for, and every institution in the world has one, and the ones in this country are simply older and better made.

I have built my entire adult life on the fact that these devices exist.

I have never once, in four buildings, been the man who had to say it.

That is the finding. That is all of it.

17.

Dr Behruz does not say cheshm.

She said no to me on the second Tuesday, in front of the governor, about the medical room, and I want to describe it precisely because it was the first *no* I had had from a human being in nine days and it went through me like cold water.

Dr Shirin Behruz [shee-REEN beh-ROOZ], forty-nine, prison physician, eleven years in that building.

I had asked — pleasantly, in passing, in the way I had asked for sixty other things — whether I might see the medical records.

And she said, “No.”

Not *cheshm*. Not *that may be difficult*. Not a look at Kani. She said no, in a flat voice, in a room with her governor in it, to a man from the province, and then she explained why in one sentence, and the sentence was that they are medical records and I am not a doctor.

Kani made a small noise.

And I said — and this is the only genuinely good thing I did in that building and it took me a fortnight to work out that it was good — I said, “Correct. I withdraw it.”

There was a silence.

Then she said, “You may see the *log*. Not the records. The log of who was seen and when, and how long they waited. That is an administrative document and you are entitled to it.”

And she went and got it herself and put it on the desk, and it was the single most useful object anybody gave me in nine days, and she had known exactly what it contained and exactly what it would do, and she had been waiting eleven years for somebody to be in a position to read it.

I have thought about her a great deal.

She was not brave. I want to be careful with that word, because she would object to it and she would be right. What she had was *a profession* — a real one, with a licence in it and a body outside that building that could take the licence away — and a professional with

an external licence is the only person in an institution who is standing on ground that the institution did not lend them.

That is the entire mechanism of her *no*. It is not character. It is structure.

Kani could not say no to me because everything he has, the province gave him.

The officer at the door could not say no to me because everything he has, Kani gave him.

And Shirin Behruz could say no to me because if that building threw her out tomorrow she would be a doctor on Thursday morning.

Everybody in that place was standing on borrowed ground, all the way up, and one woman was not, and she was the only person in nine days who told me the truth.

I have been standing on borrowed ground since 1997 and I have never once owned a thing I stood on, and it took a prison physician in a corridor to make me notice.

PART THREE — THE MARKET

Findings Eighteen to Twenty-Six

18.

Everything that is free is for sale.

I found the market in about four hours and it took me nine days to understand what I had found, and the nine days are the book.

Here is the shape of it, and I am going to set it out flatly, because everybody who has been inside knows all of this and everybody who has not thinks it is a scandal, and it is not a scandal, it is a *weather system*.

The telephone is free. Every man has an allowance of calls. The allowance is real and it is printed on a board.

The queue for the telephone is not free.

That is the whole mechanism and everything else is a variation on it. The state provides a thing, at no charge, in a quantity that is insufficient, and what is then sold is not the thing. It is the *position*. Nobody in that building sells a telephone call. What is sold is being seventh in the queue instead of thirty-first on a day when your mother is expecting you, and the price of that is understood by everyone to the rial and has been stable for years.

The medical appointment is free. Being seen this week is not.

The transfer to a wing nearer your family is free and is decided by a committee. Having your file put on the top of the pile that the committee reads on a Sunday is a different matter entirely.

Furlough — *morakhkhasi* [mo-rakh-kha-SEE] — is a legal entitlement with published criteria, and the criteria are correct and the process is fair, and the process runs on a form, and the form has to be typed, and there is one man who types.

The workshop pays. Getting into the workshop does not, formally, cost anything.

And there is the sugar, and the tea, and the good blanket, and the mattress that is not on the floor, and the second helping, and the light that gets switched off at the right time rather than the wrong time, and every single one of these things is free, and every single one of them has a price.

I mapped it in four hours from the visitors' log, the medical log, the workshop roster and the wing lists, which is four documents that nobody has ever put on the same desk, and I put them on the same desk because I am a burglar and that is the entire content of my professional training: *the building will lie to you and its books will not.*

And when I had it mapped I sat and looked at it and felt the thing I have felt perhaps five times in my life, which is not triumph.

It is the feeling of having found the way in and understanding, immediately and completely, that going in is the wrong move.

19.

These are not corrupt men.

I did the arithmetic on the Wednesday night in a room above a tyre place and it took about twenty minutes and I have never been able to unknow it.

A wing officer in that prison, at that time, was paid a salary set by a ministry. I am not going to print the number, because a number without a date is a lie and a number with a date is an argument, and I am trying not to make arguments in this book.

What I will give you is the ratio.

I worked out what that man was paid. Then I worked out what a kilo of meat cost in that town on the day I did the sum, and what a modest rent was, and what a child's school year came to with the books and the clothes.

And the salary did not reach.

It did not *nearly* reach and then fall a little short. It came to something under two-thirds of what a household of four in that town needed to stand still, and the man who told me the meat price without knowing why I was asking had been doing that job for nine years, and had three children, and one of them was at university in Zanjan.

Now.

You can hold that fact and say: then he should leave, and if all of them left the state would have to pay properly. That is a real argument and it is made by people who have never had to be somewhere on the fifteenth of the month.

Or you can hold it and say: then he should stay and take nothing and be poor, which is the argument that is actually made, out loud, by people in offices in the capital, about men in prisons in provinces they have never driven to.

Or you can do what every single person in that building had done, which is to arrive at the only arrangement that permits the institution to continue to exist: *the state provides the appearance and the staff provide the service and the prisoners' families pay for it.*

That is not corruption. Corruption is when a man takes something that would otherwise have been delivered. Nothing in that building would otherwise have been delivered. The queue for the telephone is not shorter in the absence of the market; it is exactly the same length, and nobody is seventh, and the officer's daughter is not at university in Zanjan.

I want to be precise about the harm, because there is enormous harm and I am not excusing it.

The harm is that it is *regressive*. A market in positions is a machine for converting a man's poverty into his suffering, and the men at the bottom of that wing — the ones with no family, or a family four hundred kilometres away, or a family that has stopped answering — do not get a worse deal than they would in a fair system.

They get a *much* worse deal, because in a fair system the queue is random and a poor man is sometimes seventh.

So: not corrupt men. Underpaid men, running the only functioning business in a building the budget forgot, on a customer base consisting of the mothers of the men in their care.

I wrote none of that down at the time. I sat in a room above a tyre place with a pad and I put one line in it, and the line was:

Cannot be reported. Cannot be left. Come back to this.

I came back to it eleven days later and it was worse.

20.

I bought a telephone call in 1401.

I am going to tell you this and then I am going to leave it.

In my second year at Vakilabad my mother had a fall.

I did not know she had had a fall. What I knew was that there had been no letter for eleven weeks, and that my aunt had not come on the visit, and that when I telephoned on my allowance the number rang and nobody answered, twice, three weeks apart.

The allowance is one call a fortnight if the queue permits, and the queue did not permit.

So I bought one.

I want to describe what I paid with, because I did not have money, and this is the part that people who have not been inside cannot picture. I had a job in the laundry. What I had was *position* — a small amount of it, accumulated over eighteen months, in the form of being a man who could get a thing moved from one place to another without it being noticed.

I traded four of those for one telephone call on a Tuesday afternoon.

I got through. My aunt answered. My mother had fallen in Bahman, and had broken her wrist, and was at home, and was perfectly all right, and had told everybody not to tell me because I would worry and there was nothing I could do.

I said thank you. I asked after her son. I put the telephone down and went back to the laundry.

I have never told anybody that I paid for that call and I have never told anybody what I paid with, and my mother went to her grave believing I did not know about the wrist, and I have carried the small vanity of that for years as though it were a kindness.

Here is why it is in this book.

When I sat in that governor's office with four documents on the desk and the whole market laid out in front of me like a floor plan, I did not see a system.

I saw the man who arranged my call.

He was an officer of about forty with a moustache and a bad knee, and I do not know his name and never did, and the transaction took eleven seconds and neither of us ever referred to it again.

And if a man with a lanyard had written him down in a numbered list in 1401, I would not have got through to my aunt, and my mother would have died with me not knowing about the wrist, and the man's daughter would not be wherever she is.

That is not an argument. I know it is not an argument. A thing can be both the only mercy available in a building and a machine for grinding the poorest men in it, and both of those are true at the same time and neither cancels the other, and there is no sentence that holds them.

I have been looking for the sentence for twenty years. It is not that I cannot find it. *It is that I have come to think it does not exist*, and that the people who believe they have it are the dangerous ones, and that I met one of them on the Thursday of the second week.

21.

An inspector can close a wing. He cannot open a door.

It took me until the second week to understand what was in my hand and when I understood it I sat down on a step.

Here is the inventory.

I could close a wing. Genuinely. A finding of that kind, properly constructed, with the right copies, would have shut Band Two inside a month.

I could end Bahador Kani's career. Easily. There were four routes and I had two of them by the Sunday.

I could have an officer transferred, disciplined or investigated. Any of them. Name and a paragraph.

I could get the drain looked at, possibly, in eleven months, if the copies went to the right two places.

That is the list. That is the entire content of the most powerful position I have ever occupied.

Now the other list.

I could not release one man. Not for a day. Not one hour off one sentence.

I could not get a man into the workshop, or onto a wing nearer his mother, or higher in the telephone queue, or seen by a doctor this week rather than in Aban.

I could not put a mattress off the floor. I could not issue two hundred and forty blankets that were in a locked room eleven metres from a wing where men were cold, because issuing them is an executive act and I was not an executive, I was an *inspector*, and an inspector's entire function is to write down that the blankets are in the room.

I could not feed one person.

Four buildings. In the first I could bless a woman's kitchen and twenty-two years of unnoticed work was noticed. In the second I could put a woman in a car at eleven at night and she is alive and has grandchildren. In the third I could condemn a heater with a form I made up and forty children were warm for thirty years.

And in the fourth, with more power than the other three put together, *everything in my hand was negative*.

I could subtract. That is all. I could take a career, a wing, a man's job, a governor's pension. I could not add one thing to that building, not one blanket, not one hour, not one telephone call, and the only way I could improve any condition in that place was to first destroy a person who was responsible for it.

I sat on a step outside the administration block with a pad on my knee and worked that out, and then I sat there for a further twenty minutes not doing anything at all.

There is a word for what I felt and I did not have it then. I have it now because I have had the poem explained to me since by three separate people.

The station is called *estighna* [es-tegh-NAA], and it is usually translated as detachment, and every translation I have been given makes it sound like peace.

It is not peace. It is the discovery that the world's business has become weightless, and that nothing is owed to you, and — this is the part nobody says — that *nothing can be given by you either*, because the two are the same fact seen from opposite ends.

I had spent three books believing that the theft was the price of the good.

In the fourth building I had all the authority and none of the good, and I understood that the arrangement had never been a trade at all. I had simply been in three buildings where the costume happened to open doors, and in the fourth one it only closed them, and that difference had nothing whatsoever to do with me.

22.

The old man in Band Three.

I saw him on the Monday of the second week, in the yard, during *havākhori* [ha-vaa-kho-REE].

The word means air-eating. That is the literal Persian and nobody thinks about it and everybody who has been inside knows exactly what it is: the period in which a wing is let out into the yard, and it is between forty minutes and an hour depending on the year and the staffing, and every man in that building arranges his entire day around it.

It is the school break. It is precisely, exactly the school break — the same twenty-odd minutes of permitted release in a walled yard with a bell at each end of it, and the same complete social system inside it, and the same economics.

I stood at a window on the first floor and watched a hundred and eleven men in a yard, and I could have told you the wing hierarchy

in four minutes, because it is the identical shape as forty children with sandwiches and I had spent four months learning to read it in a gorge.

He was walking the perimeter.

I want to describe him and I am aware that I am going to fail, because I had built him for two years and what was in that yard was an old man walking round a wall.

Seventy-four. Small. He walked with his hands behind his back at a pace he had clearly arrived at by long calculation — the pace at which you can go round a yard for the full hour without stopping and without getting warm. He had the particular haircut. He was talking to nobody and nobody was talking to him and it did not look like isolation, it looked like an arrangement that suited everybody.

Nemat Sohrabi. In pencil, fourteenth down the Band Three list, since 1394.

I had them bring him up on the Tuesday, to an office, on the pretext of the medical log, and they said *cheshm*, and there we were.

I did not tell him who I was.

I want to be honest about why: not strategy. I had no strategy. I had two years of a name and a hand on my arm above the elbow and I sat down opposite a small old man in a room in a prison and my mouth would not do it.

So I asked him administrative questions for eleven minutes and he answered them all, accurately and briefly, in the manner of a man who has been asked things by officials for a very long time and has worked out that the shortest true answer is the safest object in the world.

And then, at the end, in the pause before I stood up, he looked at me properly for the first time.

And he said:

“Your mother had square hands. Did she keep them?”

23.

He will not be got out.

I did not answer him. I want that on the record. A seventy-four-year-old man in a prison asked me about my mother's hands and I stood up and said we would speak again and left the room, and I got as far as the corridor and had to put my hand on a wall, which I have now done in three of these four books and I am beginning to think it is the only physical gesture I own.

Then I did what I do, which is that I spent four nights taking a building apart.

I have gone into perhaps six hundred buildings. Every one of them has a way in. That is not optimism and it is not a boast, it is a structural fact about buildings: they are made by people, for people to move through, and every constraint on that movement is a compromise between security and use, and the compromise is where you go.

I worked that prison for four nights in a room above a tyre place with a pad, and I want to set out honestly what I actually considered, because I have never told anybody and because the list is embarrassing.

The medical route. A man of seventy-four with a genuine condition can be moved to an outside hospital. Behruz would have to sign it. I got as far as drafting the sentence I would use on her and then I looked at the sentence and understood that I would be asking a woman with eleven years of clean professional conduct to forge a clinical finding for a stranger, and that if it went wrong she would lose the licence that is the only no in that building.

The transfer route. Get him moved to an open institution, or nearer a family who could apply for something. Two problems: the committee meets on a Sunday and I would be gone, and there is no family. There has been no visitor on that man's line in the log since 1396.

The furlough route. Morakhkhasi. Real, legal, published criteria, and he met four of the five, and the fifth is a guarantor with a

property deed, and he does not have one, and I could not be one, because I am a man with no papers in his own name.

That is where it stopped. Not on ingenuity. On a *deed*. The entire mechanism by which a man of seventy-four might have walked out of that gate for a fortnight requires one other human being to own something and be willing to put it behind him, and in the whole world there was nobody, and the one person standing in front of him with the will to do it did not legally exist.

The paperwork route, which is my trade and which I turned over the longest. Could I write him out? I have written eleven months of a doctor's professional life in one night. I have condemned a heater with a stamp I did not own and got a school warm.

No.

And the reason is beautiful in the way that only a genuinely well-designed thing is beautiful. A prisoner is not a fact in one building. He is a fact in four: the court that sentenced him, the provincial office, the institution, and the national register. A document that removes him from one of those creates a discrepancy with the other three, and discrepancy is the only thing that system is actually built to detect. It does not detect wrongdoing — I have proved that four times — but it detects a number that does not match another number, instantly and mercilessly, and a man is a number in four places.

That is why nobody escapes on paper. It is not that the security is good. It is that the *accounting* is good, and the accounting is good because it was designed by people who did not trust each other, which is the only reliable basis for a system that has ever been invented.

Four nights.

There is no way in. That is the second building in my life without one, and the first was a family in a gorge doing correct arithmetic about a boy of eleven, and I would like to note that in both cases the thing that defeated me was not a wall.

24.

Dr Behruz would like to use me.

She came to the office on the Wednesday and shut the door, which in that building was a louder act than shouting.

She had a folder. Eleven years of it.

I want to describe what she put on that desk, because it is one of the two or three most impressive objects I have ever been shown and I have been shown some things.

Every year since 1394 she had written a report on the medical provision of that institution. Not a complaint. A *report*: numbered, evidenced, referenced to the published standards, with the waiting-time log attached as an appendix and a covering summary of one page.

Eleven of them. Each one submitted through the correct channel, on the correct date, with the correct signature.

And on the front of each one, in her hand, a single line recording what had happened to it.

No response.

No response.

Acknowledged 3.8.96. No response.

No response.

Returned — wrong form.

No response.

She had resubmitted the one that came back wrong. On the right form. *No response.*

I read for about twenty minutes and she sat there and let me.

Then she said, "You are the first person in eleven years who is required to write something and send it upward. I would like you to use this."

I said it would be attributed to her.

She said, "Yes."

I said she would be finished in this province.

And she said, "I am forty-nine and I have written the same document eleven times. What exactly do you imagine I am protecting?"

Now, here is the part I have never said out loud, and it is the reason this chapter is in the book at all.

She was using me and she was completely right to.

I have spent four years being the man who uses institutions. It had never once occurred to me that I might be the object rather than the operator, and it did not occur to me for two more days, and when it did I laughed out loud in a street.

She had watched a man from the province arrive and open a borrowing register that nobody opens, and ask where a drain goes, and sit on a stool in a visiting room for eleven minutes for no reason anybody could see, and she had concluded — correctly, and considerably faster than I concluded anything about her — that whatever this man was, he was not a normal inspector, and that a not-normal inspector is the only kind that has ever been any use to anybody.

She did not know I was a fraud.

She knew I was *available*, which is a much more useful thing to know about a person, and I have thought since that this is what I have actually been for four years in four buildings: not a con man, not a saint, just a thing that turned up and could be used, by anybody with the wit to see it, for whatever they had been carrying that nobody would take.

Shokouh used me for a kitchen. Nasrin used me for a signature. A schoolmaster used me to carry a notebook out of a gorge.

And a doctor put a folder on a desk and said, in effect: *you are a mechanism, and I have been waiting eleven years for one.*

I said I would use it.

And she said, "I know. That is why I brought it," and picked up her tea and drank it, and did not say thank you, then or afterwards, and I have never once held that against her.

25.

I am not in a hurry.

He came on the Thursday of the second week and I saw the car from the window and I knew the shape of the man getting out of it before I could see his face, and I had eleven seconds to arrange myself and I used all of them.

Sarhang Zaker.

He ran Vakilabad when I was in it. He is provincial now — he went up, which men like him always do, because his theory produces numbers and numbers travel. He had come out to the institution for something unrelated and stayed forty minutes and had lunch, and in the course of it he was introduced to the inspector from the province, and he shook my hand.

He did not recognise me.

I want to put down exactly what that was like, because everyone assumes it was relief.

Four years I was in that man's building. He visited my bed in the infirmary and sat on a plastic chair and put it back exactly where he had found it, and told me that I was at the temperature where change becomes possible, and told me he was not in a hurry.

He looked at me for the correct social duration and let go of my hand.

I was thin then. I am not now. I had no beard then. I have one. I was a number in a block and I am a man in a grey jacket with a lanyard, and the whole of my life's work is the demonstration that people do not see faces, they see *positions*, and here it was performed on me by the one man in this country I have genuinely been afraid of.

And it was not relief. It was something much worse and I did not have a name for it until later.

He talked at lunch. He was, I have to say, good company — dry, unhurried, precise. He talked about the province, and about the recidivism figures, and about a scheme he is running now for clerics to go into prisons and sit with the men, which I know about

because I received the circular in a salt town four years ago and answered it in eight words.

And then he said the thing.

Somebody asked him — the deputy, making conversation — whether he was pushing for the scheme to expand.

And Zaker said, “No. It will expand. I am not in a hurry.”

And I sat at that table and put a piece of bread down.

He says it about everything. That is what I finally understood. It was never about me. It is not a threat and it never was a threat; it is a description of how the man understands time, and I have carried that sentence for six years believing it was aimed at me personally, and it was simply the way he talks, and he would have said it to a wall.

I have thought about which is worse and I keep changing my mind.

26.

The numbers are good.

That evening I read the figures properly, because they were in a folder on a desk and because I had spent lunch being frightened of a man who did not know I existed, and I wanted to find something wrong with him.

I did not find anything wrong with them.

Here is what the province’s figures showed, and I have had them checked since by a person qualified to check them, and they hold.

Men released from institutions run on Zaker’s method come back at a lower rate. Not marginally. *Substantially*, and consistently, over eleven years, across four institutions, and the effect survives the obvious objections — it is not that he gets easier men, because the intake is allocated centrally and I checked; it is not a reporting artefact, because the figure that matters is a court conviction elsewhere in the country.

The method is what he has always said it is. Pressure. Structure applied without cruelty and without exception, and no negotiation

about anything, ever, and a man's day arranged from the outside from the moment he wakes until the moment he does not.

I hated it in the eleventh month of my first year with a purity I have never achieved about anything else.

And fewer of his men come back.

I sat with that in a room above a tyre place and I want to record honestly what I did with it, which is that I spent about two hours trying to make it not be true and failed, and then spent the rest of the night on the actual problem, which is this:

The number is made of men.

The figure is an average and the average is real. And underneath the average are individual human beings, and eleven of them are the men I did four years with, and I can tell you what happened to four of them, and two of those four are exactly what the number says and two of them are not in the number at all because the thing that happened to them does not get counted.

You cannot argue with the average by producing a man. That is not how averages work and everybody who tries it is doing something dishonest.

And you cannot answer a man by producing the average, and everybody who tries *that* is doing something worse.

So I sat there with a true number and a true objection and no sentence that holds both, exactly as I had sat two nights earlier with an officer's daughter in Zanzibar and a poor man thirty-first in a telephone queue.

That is twice in one week that I have found a thing with two true halves and no sentence.

I have started to wonder whether the sentences exist at all, or whether every arrangement I have ever walked into is made of these, and the only difference between a wise man and me is that he has learned to stop looking for the sentence and get on with the afternoon.

If that is wisdom I would like it noted that it is indistinguishable from not caring, and that I met a man that week who had achieved it completely, and that he was in charge of a prison.

PART FOUR — THE PIPE

Findings Twenty-Seven to Thirty-Four

27.

A grandfather's knees.

I was offered opium on the second Friday, in a house, correctly, with tea, by a man for whom refusing would have been the rude thing, and I want to set out how that works before I tell you what it did, because otherwise you will read the next chapter wrong.

Teriak [ter-YAAK]. Opium.

There is a generation in this country — my father's, and the one behind it — for whom this is not a drug. I want that stated flatly and I am aware of how it sounds. It is what a grandfather takes for his knees. It is in a small tin, in a cloth, on a shelf, in a house where nobody would dream of touching alcohol. It is *for the pain*, and the pain in question is usually genuine and usually a joint, and the man taking it has taken the same quantity every evening for thirty years and will do until he dies.

And it is hospitality. That is the part that is impossible to convey. In certain houses, of a certain age, in certain provinces, it is brought out for a guest the way tea is brought out, and it is prepared with some ceremony, and to decline is not a moral position, it is a *social event*, and everybody in the room will be gracious about it and something will have happened that did not need to happen.

My father did not take it. My father was a devout crook with a ledger and he thought it was for people with no discipline, which is a sentence I have thought about a great deal given the rest of his conduct.

My uncle took it for eleven years for a hip and died of something else entirely at seventy-nine.

The man who offered it to me was seventy-something and I had gone to his house about the wall contractor, which is one of the absurd things I had asked for during the week of the grape, and he had turned out to be the contractor's brother, and he had been extremely helpful, and then it was five o'clock and there was tea, and then there was the other thing.

Vafur [va-FOOR] — the pipe. A brazier. Charcoal. Tongs. It takes some time and the time is part of it.

I want to record why I did not decline, and I am going to give the true answer and not the flattering one.

The flattering one is that I was in a house as a guest and that refusing a seventy-year-old man's hospitality in his own front room is a real discourtesy in this country and that I was, at that moment, an official of the province and could not afford to be memorable.

All of which is true, and it is not the reason.

The reason is that I was tired.

I had been in that building nine days. I had sat on a stool and worked out something about my wife. I had a folder of eleven reports on my desk from a woman who had asked me to be a weapon. I had a small old man in Band Three who had asked me about my mother's hands and I had not answered him. I had two arithmetics with no sentence and I had understood, on a step, that everything in my hand was negative.

And a man of seventy said, would you.

And I said yes, please, and I have thought about the *please* ever since.

28.

Nothing came.

There have been three of these.

In a stone chamber in a salt town, on the third night of a vigil, in smoke from a seed my mother burned over my head at every threshold of my life, something used my prison name and told me I had been brought back and that she had stood where I was sitting. I filed it under grief. The filing was good and I stand by it.

Ninety feet under a desert in bad air, a colleague in a bad mood did a handover on a Thursday afternoon and corrected me on a point of procedure I had never considered, and I have never been able to make my own explanation cover it.

In an old woman's front room in a gorge, under a cloth, my mother came in from the yard in the housecoat with the small flowers and sat down on the floor with a bowl of herbs and told me the whole thing, in order, for two hours, in plain Persian, and my head did not lay down one word of it.

Three of them. Each one told me something.

The fourth one told me nothing at all.

I want to be very precise here because this is the finding.

There was no vision. Nothing appeared, nothing spoke, nothing corrected me, nobody came in from the yard. There was no distortion of time in the sense that the tunnel distorted it, and there was no geometry, and the walls did exactly what walls do.

What happened is that I sat in a room in a chair for about four hours and *everything stopped pressing*.

That is the whole of it. Nothing was removed. I did not forget anything, I was not confused, my faculties were entirely present — and this is what nobody tells you and what makes it different in kind from the other three: *I was completely lucid*. I could have done arithmetic. I could have given you the wing lists. I gave the old man an entirely coherent opinion about the contractor.

I simply did not care about any of it.

Not in the sense of numbness. Numbness I know; that is what a bad year gives you and it has a texture and it is horrible. This was not the absence of feeling. It was the absence of *weight*. Every single thing I had been carrying up the stairs was still there in the room with me, in full detail, in colour, and none of it was on me.

The old man in Band Three: still there. Still seventy-four. Still no deed, no visitor, no way in. And it did not press.

The folder of eleven reports: still on the desk. Did not press.

The two hours with my mother that my head did not record: entirely present, entirely intact as a fact, and I could turn it over like a stone, and it weighed nothing.

Four hours.

And I want to write down the true thing about those four hours, which I have said to one person in twenty years.

It was the most restful experience of my adult life.

Not the best. I have been happy; I sat on a dispensary floor once for twenty minutes discussing a generator starter and I would give a great deal for that twenty minutes back. That was happiness and it had weight in it.

This was rest, and I had never had any, not once, not since I was seventeen, and I did not know that a man could put a thing down without solving it.

I went back to the room above the tyre place at about ten and slept for eleven hours, which I have also never done.

And in the morning it was all back on me, exactly as it had been, to the gram.

That is the whole mechanism and it is why every man in that prison who can get it, gets it. It does not take anything away. It gives you a night off from the arithmetic, and in the morning the arithmetic is identical, and the only thing that has changed is that you now know a night off exists.

I have thought about the other three a great deal. They frightened me and I have written thousands of words about them.

This one did not frighten me at all, and that is the reason it is the one I am careful about.

29.

I understand every man in that building now, and it is not sympathy, it is arithmetic.

I went back in on the Saturday and looked at the yard during *havākhori* and I could see it.

That is the thing about the fourth substance: it does not show you anything you could not have worked out. It just puts you on the other side of the working-out, and afterwards you cannot get back to the side where you had to work it out, and everything looks different from there and nothing has changed.

A hundred and eleven men in a yard. And I now knew — not as an inference, as a fact in the body — exactly what a night off is worth to a man serving nine years, and exactly what he will pay for it, and exactly why the market in that building has the shape it has.

The queue for the telephone is a market in position and the position is worth what a mother's voice is worth.

And the other thing is a market in *weight*, and the weight is worth more, because a telephone call lasts eleven minutes and ends, and puts the weight back on you heavier, and the other thing lasts four hours and does not.

I could have done the mathematics of that in Vakilabad. I did do the mathematics of it in Vakilabad, and I got the right answer, and I looked at the men who were spending everything on it and thought: *that is a poor trade*.

It is a poor trade. I want to be absolutely clear that I still think it is a poor trade and that I would say so to any man's face.

But there is a difference between knowing a trade is poor and knowing what is being bought, and I had done four years and a burglary and two escapes and three towns without ever once knowing what was being bought, and a seventy-year-old man in a front room showed me in four hours, for nothing, as a courtesy, with tea.

I want to put down one more thing and then I will leave it.

I did not go back.

Not out of strength. I want that understood, because it would be very easy to write a sentence here about resisting something and it would be a lie and I have not lied to you yet in four books that I know of.

I did not go back because I had eleven days left in that town and a report to write and a small old man in Band Three, and because the arrangement I have with myself — the only one I have ever kept — is that I do not do anything that would make me slow.

That is not a moral position. It is a professional one. It is the same reason I never carried a weapon.

And I have wondered since, more than once, in bad months, what I would have done if I had had nothing to be quick for.

30.

What the old man actually knows.

I went back to him on the Monday and this time I let him do the talking, and it took eleven minutes and it was handed to me the way everything in my life has been handed to me, which is sideways and by somebody who was not asked.

He did not ask who I was. That is the first thing.

He had asked about my mother's hands on the Tuesday and I had walked out, and in the six days since then he had, I am now certain, worked the whole thing out from four facts and a face, and he had decided to say nothing about it, and he never did say anything about it, not that day and not on the last day, and I have never been sure whether that was mercy or manners or simply what happens to a man after eleven years inside.

He said, "You want to know what she wanted."

I said yes.

And he said, "I do not know what she wanted. I never met her."

I want you to sit with that the way I had to.

Two years. A name in a fourth column that turned out not to be a name. A correction from a tunnel. A notebook in a tin in a gorge with four columns ruled by hand and a set of six codes given verbally in ninety seconds. A page with a name on it written four times by a man who wrote things down for forty-eight years. A hand on my arm above the elbow. Nine weeks in a town. A driver at the wrong guesthouse.

And a small old man in a prison yard says: *I never met her.*

Then he told me what he does know, and it is worse than what I went there for, and it is smaller, and I am going to give it exactly as he gave it because that is how these things should be given.

He was not one of the boys with notebooks.

He was one of the men who collected them.

Not the man in the town behind the desk who counted pages without reading them — that man died in the war in 1361 and I already knew that. Sohrabi was above him. He was twenty-six and he was clever and it was 1357 and somebody had put him in charge of a thing that had a shape but no name, in four districts, for one winter.

He read them. That is the thing. Somebody had to read them and it was him, and he read something over four thousand of those lines, in a room, in the winter of a revolution, and then he wrote a summary, and the summary went up, and he never saw it again.

I asked him what happened to the notebooks.

And he said, "I do not know. I gave them to a man in a car."

I asked what the fourth column was for.

And he told me, and it was exactly what the schoolmaster in the gorge had reconstructed over forty-eight years of thinking about it in a village, and I sat there and had the one piece of hard confirmation I have ever received about any of this, and it changed nothing whatsoever, because I still do not know what is in my mother's line.

Then he said the thing I actually came for, and he did not know he was saying it, and I did not know I had come for it.

He said: "It was the only honest year. Do you understand? For one winter this country asked four thousand people what they wanted and wrote it down. Nobody has asked anybody anything since."

And then he said, "I have thought about that every day for forty-eight years and I am not sorry I did it."

And I said, "Are you sorry about the summary?"

And he said, "Yes."

And that is the whole of it. That is what I got. Two years, three provinces and a prison, and what is at the end of it is a man of seventy-four in a yard who read four thousand people's wants in a winter and wrote them up, and is not sorry about the reading and is

sorry about the writing, and cannot tell me one single thing about my mother.

31.

Now.

Mahnaz rang on the Tuesday and said one word and then a name and then a place and a date, and the whole call was under ninety seconds and she did not ask how I was.

"Now."

I said I was in the middle of something.

And she said, "You are always in the middle of something. That is what you are."

Which is the most accurate sentence anybody has said about me in four books and she said it as an aside, on a telephone, while doing something else, the way she says everything.

The matter is the one she raised in Bahman. A man called Davoud, connected to her sister's family, a thing that is not legal and cannot become legal, and a room, and one hour, and a coat.

I am still not going to write down what it was. I have said that once already and it holds. What I will write down is the two things about that call that mattered, and neither of them is Davoud.

The first is that she had a date. The eleventh of Mordad. Which meant she had known for weeks and had chosen when to tell me, and had chosen a moment when I would have to rearrange something, and I do not believe for a second that this was calculated, and I do not believe for a second that it was not.

The second is what I said.

I said yes.

Not *I'll think about it*, which is what I said in Bahman and which we both understood to be a yes. I said yes, immediately, on the telephone, standing in a doorway with a man doing stock four feet away, and I want to examine that because it is the only genuinely new thing that happened to me in that town.

Four books. Four coats. And I have taken every single one of them because it was in front of me and I could not decline — a coat on a chair, a bag on a rack, keys on a counter, a man saying *Aqa-ye bāzras*.

Not one of the four was asked for.

And now a woman I was married to for seven years rang me up and *asked me for something*, plainly, with a date, and I said yes in about a second, and afterwards I stood in that doorway and understood that I had been waiting my entire adult life for somebody to ask me for something and that this was the first time it had ever happened.

Shokouh did not ask. Nasrin did not ask; she built a machine and put me in it, correctly. A schoolmaster did not ask, he handed me a page and told me not to go straight there. A doctor put a folder on a desk and said she would like me to use it, which is the closest anybody has come, and even that was a transaction between professionals.

Mahnaz asked.

She asked in the coldest possible way, for a thing that is not entirely legal, using an asset she has valued precisely and does not sentimentalise. She asked the way you ask a ladder.

And it went through me like warm water and I said yes, and I have never told anybody that, and I would rather it were not true.

Then she said, "Don't wear the hat."

And I said, "It's the hat you want."

And she said, "I know. Don't wear it into the building," and put the telephone down.

32.

A hood is a kindness if you have never seen.

I got the hawk from the librarian, on the Wednesday, in the room with the eleven hundred books, and I had gone in there to apologise to him and had not managed it.

I want to say what I actually did, since I have been honest so far. I went to that room intending to say something about the register, and I stood in it for four minutes talking about the shelving, and then I asked him what he was reading, which is a coward's question, and he showed me.

Attar.

He had it because it is on the school curriculum and there were four copies and he had kept one out for himself for nine years.

And I said I had heard of it, and that I had had it from three people and got it wrong every time, and he said, without any edge at all, "Which bird do you want?"

I said I did not understand the question.

He said, "Everybody wants one. Tell me your situation and I will tell you which bird you are, it is not difficult, it is a poem about excuses."

So I told him nothing about my situation, because I am what I am, and I asked him instead which bird he was.

And he said: "The hawk."

Then he told me, and he told it better than the schoolmaster did, and the schoolmaster told it correctly.

The hawk will not go. All the birds of the world are setting off across seven valleys to find the Simorgh, and the hawk stands up and says: I already have a king. I sit on his wrist. I am fed by hand and I wear a hood and when the hood comes off I am shown exactly what I am to look at and I am extremely good at it, and I am honoured, and I have a *position*, and I do not see why I should go a very long way to find another king when I am already at court.

I said that sounded reasonable.

And the librarian of a prison in the north-west of this country, aged sixty-one, in a room with eleven hundred unread books in it, said:

"It is completely reasonable. That is the trouble with him. Every other bird gives an excuse that is obviously an excuse. The nightingale is in love, the duck is comfortable, the owl is greedy.

The hawk gives a *reason*, and it is a good one, and he is right about all of it, and he is still in a hood."

I said, "And what does the hoopoe say to him?"

He said, "I have never been satisfied with what the hoopoe says to him."

And I went back to the administration block and sat down and did not write anything for about twenty minutes, because I had spent nine days watching Bahador Kani say *cheshm* to a province that has never given him a single thing he asked for, and I had spent four years wearing four coats and being extremely good, inside each one, at exactly what I was shown.

33.

The only way to help anybody here is to hurt somebody first.

I worked out the report on the Thursday morning and it took about two hours and it is the cleanest piece of thinking I have ever done and I wish I had been stupider.

Here is the problem as it stood.

I had eleven documents from Behruz proving that the medical provision in that institution had been below the published standard for eleven years, with a waiting-time log that was unanswerable.

I had a drain of unknown destination under a yard.

I had two hundred and forty blankets in a locked room and a wing that was cold.

I had a market in positions that could not be reported without destroying the only functioning mercy in the building and the household income of ninety underpaid men.

And I had a governor who had handed me his worst problem in a sentence he had spent three weeks building, and who had written to the province four times about the drain, and who was the reason the medical reports had been forwarded correctly for eleven years, and who was — I established this on the Wednesday from the correspondence file, and it is the thing that finished me — *the man*

who had submitted every single one of Behruz's eleven reports upward with a covering note supporting it.

He had backed her every year for eleven years. And every year it went into a tray in a city.

Now.

Here is how the machine actually works, and I had known it since a school in a gorge and I had used it twice for good and I was about to use it for the third time.

A report that describes a *condition* does nothing. Eleven years of Behruz proves that. Conditions are weather; nobody in a tray is worse off because a condition exists in a province four hours away.

A report that names a *person* moves.

That is the whole of it. That is the entire mechanism of that state and I suspect of every state. You cannot make an institution act by demonstrating that something is wrong. You can only make it act by arranging matters so that a specific named individual will be worse off if it does not, and the machinery will then move with astonishing speed to protect itself from that individual's failure, and the condition may be fixed on the way past.

So: to get eleven years of medical failure acted on, the report has to have a name in it.

And the name has to be the accountable officer.

And the accountable officer is Bahador Kani, who has been submitting the evidence upward for eleven years with a covering note.

I sat in that office and looked for the other way for two hours. There is not one. I checked whether I could name the province — you cannot; a report from a province to a province about a province produces nothing. I checked whether I could name Behruz's superior — she has none in that building. I checked whether the drain could carry it, since the drain is genuinely dangerous and genuinely nobody's fault; and it will not carry it, because a drain has no name attached, and I would be writing another condition into another tray.

There is exactly one document that gets a doctor and a wing and a drain looked at, and it is a document that ends the career of the one man in that building who has been quietly on the right side of all three for six years.

I understood that at about eleven in the morning on the Thursday.

And then, at about four in the afternoon, on the same Thursday, the other thing happened.

34.

There were four officers on that Thursday and Friday. I had the names on the Saturday of the first week, off the roster board, in the pad, underlined.

The wing at that hour is a hundred and eleven men and two officers. That is not a violation; it is within the staffing table, which was written in a ministry by people who have never been on a wing at four in the afternoon on a Thursday in Mordad.

A man on Band Two named Yasin Foroughi, aged twenty-six, four years in, eleven months left, had put in for the workshop three times.

At about ten past four he went into the shower block and was found at twenty to five.

I was in the administration building. I heard it start — you hear it as a change in the sound of a building, a running that is not the normal running — and I went to the window and then I went down and they stopped me at the wing door, correctly, and I stood in that corridor for about forty minutes.

Behruz was there in nine minutes and there was nothing to do in nine minutes and there had not been anything to do since twenty past four.

He had a mother in Ardabil. There is one entry on his visitors' log in four years and it is her, in 1402.

The last thing on his file is the third workshop application, dated the ninth of Tir, marked *received*.

I want to set down the facts and nothing else.

Two officers, a hundred and eleven men, a Thursday afternoon. A shower block with a line of sight from the wing office that stops at the third pillar, which I had walked past on the second day and made no note of.

He was twenty-six.

I had the roster in my pad, underlined, for eleven days. I underlined it because I have known since I was seventeen years old that the world is thin on a Thursday. That is not hindsight and I will not be permitted to call it hindsight: I wrote it down because I knew, and then I went to look at a drain, and I looked at the drain for eleven days.

Bahador Kani came out of the wing at about six and stood in the corridor and did not see me for a moment, and then did, and straightened up, and said:

"Aqa-ye bāzras."

And I said his name.

And he said, "You will put this in the report."

And I said yes.

And he said, "Cheshm."

PART FIVE — THE REPORT

Findings Thirty-Five to Forty

35.

I have written a better document than any real inspector in this province.

I wrote it over two nights in a room above a tyre place with the window open, and it is nineteen pages, and it is the finest piece of work of my life, and I would burn every other thing I have ever made to get it back.

I am going to set out how it was built, because you will need it, and because a man should be honest about the one thing he is actually good at.

It is entirely true. Not one invented sentence. Not one. I had spent four years manufacturing hadith and supervision logs and clause references that do not exist, and when I finally had a document that could do real damage I did not need to invent a syllable, and that is the whole indictment of the province in one line: everything necessary to destroy that institution was already in its own files, correctly filed, in the right form, submitted on time.

It is not angry. An angry report is a gift to the man who receives it, because he can put it down and think about the person who wrote it instead of the thing it says. Mine has no adjectives in it. The medical section is the waiting-time log, transcribed, with the published standard beside it in a second column, and a one-line note of the date of each of Dr Behruz's eleven submissions and the response to each. That is all. The reader does the arithmetic and the arithmetic does the work, and a man who has done his own arithmetic cannot un-know it.

It is sequenced. The reader arrives at the death having already established, on his own, over four pages, that a wing was understaffed on Thursday afternoons within the staffing table.

It names. Once. In the correct place, in the correct form, without emphasis: the accountable officer for the institution over the period, with dates.

And the copies.

Third time in four years. In a gorge I put a copy line on a heater condemnation and got a flue in eleven days. In the same gorge I put one on a woman's fifth transfer application and she is in Zanjan. It is the only trick I have ever had and it is not a trick, it is simply the difference between a request and a record, and I learned it out of a folder of circulars with a child's dictionary in a cold room.

This one had three: the provincial health authority. The office that runs the reintegration scheme, which is Zaker's office. And the prisons inspectorate itself.

Three recipients means it cannot be lost. Two men in two buildings cannot agree to leave it in a tray, because each of them has to assume the other is reading it, and that assumption is the entire load-bearing structure of every functioning bureaucracy on earth.

I read it back at about four in the morning.

It is correct, it is unanswerable, it is beautifully sequenced, it names one man, and it will get a doctor eleven years of what she asked for, and a wing looked at, and a drain traced, and it will detonate on Bahador Kani and take his pension with it.

And I want to record the thing I felt at four in the morning, because I expected to feel sick and I did not.

I felt *good*. For about ninety seconds I sat in a room above a tyre place and admired my own work, the way I used to stand in a stairwell at three in the morning and admire a lock I had taken apart.

Then it came, and it has not entirely gone.

36.

The copy goes to somebody else.

There is a sentence I have used three times and I want to look at it properly now, because I have been very pleased with it for four years.

A letter with one recipient is a request. A letter with two is a record.

I said it about a heater and it was true and forty children were warm. I said it about a transfer application and it was true and a woman went home to her mother.

It is still true. That is what I have not been able to get round. It is not a clever line that turns out to be hollow; it is a correct piece of engineering, and I proved it three times, and the third time it killed a man's career.

The tool did not change. *I did not change.* I used the identical mechanism, with the identical skill, for the identical reason, and the first two times the province paid and the third time a decent man of fifty-five paid, and the difference between those outcomes had nothing whatsoever to do with my intentions, my character, or anything I did.

The difference is that in a school there was nobody standing between the problem and the ministry, and in a prison there was, and his name was on the form.

I have thought about this more than about anything else in this book.

Because here is where it leaves me. If a tool produces good when there is nobody in the way and harm when there is somebody in the way, then the tool is not moral in either direction and neither am I, and every one of the three occasions was the same act, and I have spent four years accumulating credit for two of them.

Four buildings, and the honest accounting is this: I did not do good in a shrine and a clinic and a school and then do harm in a prison.

I did the same thing four times. Three of them landed on institutions and one of them landed on a man.

That is not remorse and I am not offering it as remorse. Remorse would require me to say I would not send it, and I sent it, and I would send it again, because eleven years of a doctor's reports and a boy of twenty-six in a shower block are on the other side of the scale and I am not going to insult either of them by pretending it was close.

It was not close. It was simply not free.

37.

She did not thank me.

I gave Behruz the draft on the last Sunday, in the medical room, and she read all nineteen pages standing up, which took eleven minutes, and I watched her do it.

She got to the naming on page fourteen and stopped and read it twice.

Then she finished it and put it down on the desk and squared it to the edge, which everybody in this country does with a document that matters, and she said:

"He supported every one of mine."

I said I knew.

She said, "He wrote the covering notes himself. He did not have to."

I said I knew that too, and that it was in the correspondence file, and that I had read it on the Wednesday.

And she stood there for a while.

Then she said: "Is there another version?"

And I said no. And I told her what I have told you — that a report describing a condition goes into a tray, that a report naming a person moves, that I had spent two hours looking for the other document and there is not one, and that the only reason her eleven reports had gone upward correctly for eleven years is the man whose career the twelfth one will end.

She listened to all of it.

Then she picked the document up and gave it back to me and said, "Send it."

And she did not thank me, then or afterwards.

I have thought about that a great deal and I have concluded that she was entirely right not to, and that a thank-you would have been the worst thing that happened in that building, because a thank-you

would have made it a favour between two people, and it was not a favour and there were no two people in it.

She had eleven years of documents and I had a lanyard and neither of us was doing the other one a kindness. We were two mechanisms that happened to be in the same room at the same time, and the machine went round, and a thing that should have happened in 1394 happened in 1406, and a man who did not deserve it paid for it.

She said one more thing, at the door, and it is the only sentence anybody said to me in that province that I have not been able to file.

She said: "You are not an inspector."

I said nothing at all.

And she said, "I do not care what you are. Send it," and went back to her patients.

38.

Kani says cheshm.

I gave it to him on the last morning because he was entitled to see it, and because I am a coward in exactly one direction and I could not have got on a bus otherwise.

He read it at his desk with me sitting opposite in the good chair.

Nineteen pages. He read all of them and he did not hurry and he did not skip, and when he got to page fourteen his face did not do anything at all, which I now recognise as the same discipline that kept his eyes off a white paint stripe for four days.

At the end he squared it to the edge of the desk.

He said, "It is a good report."

I said nothing.

He said, "It is a very good report. Nobody has ever sent one like this from here." He turned it round so it faced me, which is a thing you do with a document you are giving back. "The medical section

is correct and the sequencing is correct and the copies are correct. Three is right. Two would have been lost."

And then he said, "The drain will be traced within the year."

I said I hoped so.

And he said — and this is the whole of the man and it is why I have not been able to put this book down for twenty years —

"It will. That is the only way it was ever going to happen."

He knew. He had known since the first afternoon. He had spent three weeks deciding which of his problems to hand to the inspector and he had chosen the one that could kill somebody over the one that could kill his career, and then a boy of twenty-six died in a shower block on a Thursday and the choice was taken away from him, and he understood inside about four hours that the only document that could fix any of it would have his own name on page fourteen.

He looked at me across a desk in a good chair.

He was fifty-five. He had three children and one of them was in uniform. He had hung his own certificate four centimetres too low because he had wanted it up and had not asked anybody to do it for him.

And he said:

"Cheshm."

Nine days. Somewhere over a hundred *cheshm*, and I had tested them and priced them and written an essay about them and asked for a grape to find the edge, and I never found it, and here it was: the last one, from the top of the building, about his own career, said properly and meant.

It means *at once*. It means *this conversation is over*. It means *no*.

It is the same word for all three because you cannot tell.

I have never known which one he meant and I never will, and I have come to understand that this is not a failure of my hearing. *He did not know either*. That is what the word is for. It is what a man says when there is no sentence, and I had spent four days looking

for the edge of the arrangement and the edge is that there is no sentence, and everybody in that building had arrived there years before I did and had one syllable for it.

39.

Five men.

I posted it from the town on the eleventh of Mordad and got on a bus.

Five men.

A burglar for twenty-seven years, which was not a success. A sayyid for fourteen months. A doctor for fourteen weeks. A teacher for four months, which is the only one I would do again. And an inspector for nine days, which is the only one that had any power in it and the only one that did no good that was not paid for by somebody standing next to me.

The count goes up and does not come down. At three I could still call it luck. At four I called it a career. At five I have stopped calling it anything, and I notice that the intervals are getting shorter, and that I no longer wait to be mistaken for something — I get into the car.

The hawk sits on the king's wrist. He is fed by hand and he wears a hood, and when the hood comes off he is shown exactly what he is to look at, and he is extremely good at it, and he is honoured for it, and he gives the only reason in that entire poem that is actually a reason.

I have worn four hoods.

Inside each one I have been shown a small piece of a building and told that it was the whole of the job, and I have been excellent at exactly that piece, and everybody was very pleased, and I have never once been permitted to see the rest of it, and — this is the part the librarian was right about and it took me eleven days to feel it — *I did not want to.*

A hood is not a cruelty to a bird that has never seen. It is a kindness. It is the reason he can sit still on a wrist all day without going mad.

I am forty-seven years old and I have a folded page in my coat with a name on it that turned out to belong to a man who never met my mother, and a date in Mordad, and a woman who has asked me for something.

40.

What it cost him.

I want to end with what happened to Bahador Kani, because it is not my story and it is the only part of this that matters.

The report went in on the eleventh of Mordad. It was acknowledged in eleven days, which I am told is extraordinary.

The medical provision was reviewed in Aban. Dr Behruz got, in the space of about four months, the substance of eleven years of documents: a second clinical session, a supply arrangement that did not go through the institution's own budget line, and a waiting-time standard that is audited from outside. I have been told she is still there.

The wing staffing on Thursday and Friday afternoons was changed in Azar. It is now three, and there is a sightline board, and the third pillar in the shower block at that institution has a mirror on it.

The drain was traced in Farvardin of the following year. It runs into a culvert of the original barracks and from there into a course that had been open in 1345 and is not now. It was, as everybody had privately assumed and nobody had established, a great deal worse than anybody expected, and it cost a very large amount of money, and it was fixed.

Every single thing in that report happened. I have never had that before and I will not have it again.

Sarhang Bahador Kani was removed from post in Mehr, pending. The pending lasted fourteen months.

He was not prosecuted; there was nothing to prosecute. He was found to have been the accountable officer for an institution in which a documented and repeatedly reported deficiency had persisted for eleven years, which is true, and which he had reported upward himself every one of those eleven years, which was not relevant to the finding, because the finding is about accountability and not about conduct and those are two different things and only one of them is written down.

His pension was affected. I do not know by how much and I have never been able to find out and I have tried.

His son is still in uniform. I know that much.

He was fifty-five when I met him and he had run that place for six years and he came round the desk to shake my hand within ninety seconds, and he hung his own certificate four centimetres too low, and he read nineteen pages that ended his working life without skipping a line and then told me the sequencing was correct.

He was the best man in that building and I was the worst thing that ever happened to him and both of those are simply true.

I would send it again.

That is the finding. That is all of them.

GLOSSARY

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*.

band BAND — Persian. A prison wing. The same word means a bond, a tie, a knot, a dam, and a bandage.

bāzras baaz-RAS — Persian. inspector. From *bāz*, again, and *rasidan*, to arrive at: one who goes over a thing a second time.

cheshm CHESHM — Persian. eye. As a reply, the short form of upon my eye: at once, certainly, consider it done. Also, depending on nothing that can be determined from the outside, this conversation is now over, and no.

havākhorī ha-vaa-kho-REE — Persian. literally air-eating. The exercise period, when a wing is let out into the yard.

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 owl will not leave the ruins because there is treasure buried beneath them; and the hawk will not go because he already sits on a king's wrist, hooded and fed by hand, and is honoured there. Their guide is the hoopoe. It is taught in Iranian schools.

morakhkhasi mo-rakh-kha-SEE — Arabic via Persian. leave, licence. Prison furlough: a legal entitlement with published criteria, one of which is a guarantor with a property deed.

qanat gha-NAAT — Arabic via Persian. channel. A hand-dug tunnel bringing water by gravity from an aquifer to a settlement.

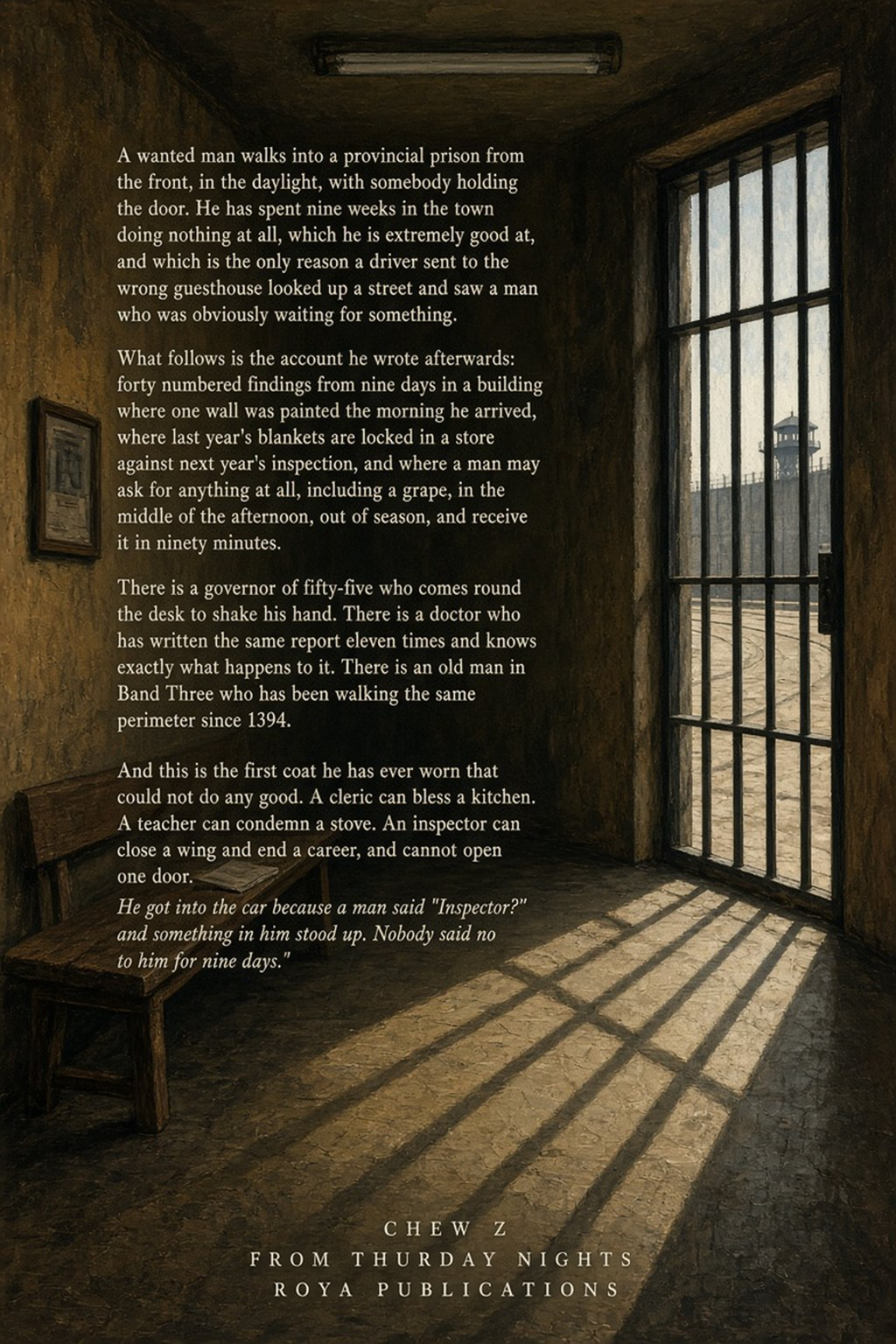
Simorgh see-MORGH — Persian. from Middle Persian *senmurw*.
The great bird of Persian myth; in the *Shahnameh* the protector
of Zal, and in Attar the king the birds go to find.

teriak ter-YAAK — from the Greek *thēriakē*, an antidote. Opium.

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

vafur va-FOOR — Persian. The long pipe used for smoking opium,
worked over charcoal with tongs.

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

The background image is a photograph of a prison cell. It features a large window with vertical metal bars on the right side. Through the window, a prison yard with a guard tower is visible. On the left wall, there is a small framed picture. A wooden bench is positioned in the lower-left corner of the cell. The floor is made of stone tiles, and the walls are a rough, textured material. A fluorescent light fixture is mounted on the ceiling.

A wanted man walks into a provincial prison from the front, in the daylight, with somebody holding the door. He has spent nine weeks in the town doing nothing at all, which he is extremely good at, and which is the only reason a driver sent to the wrong guesthouse looked up a street and saw a man who was obviously waiting for something.

What follows is the account he wrote afterwards: forty numbered findings from nine days in a building where one wall was painted the morning he arrived, where last year's blankets are locked in a store against next year's inspection, and where a man may ask for anything at all, including a grape, in the middle of the afternoon, out of season, and receive it in ninety minutes.

There is a governor of fifty-five who comes round the desk to shake his hand. There is a doctor who has written the same report eleven times and knows exactly what happens to it. There is an old man in Band Three who has been walking the same perimeter since 1394.

And this is the first coat he has ever worn that could not do any good. A cleric can bless a kitchen. A teacher can condemn a stove. An inspector can close a wing and end a career, and cannot open one door.

He got into the car because a man said "Inspector?" and something in him stood up. Nobody said no to him for nine days."

C H E W Z
F R O M T H U R D A Y N I G H T S
R O Y A P U B L I C A T I O N S