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No. 77

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ROMANU

OPENING ACT

پیش پرده

C H E W Z

OPENING ACT

پیش پرده

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 77

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FROM THE DELGOSHĀ

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A NOTE ON THE PLATE

Every year, on the last night of winter, an old woman cleans her house and lays out the seven things and puts on her good scarf and sets her slippers beside the chair, and sits down to wait for Amu Nowruz.

Every year she falls asleep before he arrives.

He comes in out of the snow, leaning on his staff, with the melt running off him onto her floor. He finds her sleeping. He does not wake her, because you do not wake an old woman who has been waiting all year. He lays a bunch of narcissus and hyacinth and almond blossom on the floor beside her chair, and he goes back out into the night.

She wakes and the flowers are there and he is not.

This has been going on for a very long time and neither of them has ever managed to fix it, and children are told the story every spring and find it sad in a way they cannot explain.

The plate opposite shows the moment. He has stopped in the doorway with the flowers in his hand and the snow still melting off his shoulders, and if you look at his face you will see that he is apologising to a sleeping woman for something he believes is his fault.

نہ سرما و عمو نوروز



Every year she cleans the house and sets out the seven things.
Every year she sits down to wait, and sleeps, and he comes and goes.
Every year he leaves flowers, and believes he has missed her again.
Somebody has to be asleep when the year turns. It has always been her.

THE STANDING OF THE CASE

The fourth day

There is an old Persian book in which a prince is accused of something he did not do and cannot answer the charge, because his teacher has forbidden him to speak for seven days. Seven ministers take turns telling the king stories, one day at a time, to delay the execution until the boy is permitted to open his mouth. Nobody in that book ever argues. They only tell stories, and the stories are all that stand between a young man and a rope.

These notebooks are kept by a man who supplies jokes and does not perform them. He has never had a byline.

Seven years ago his younger brother said eleven of his words out loud in a basement, under his own name, and was filmed doing it. That was the first day.

Four years ago the words came loose and stopped belonging to anybody, and there was nothing to be done about it that did not begin with a claim. That was the second.

Two years ago he wrote nine minutes for a young woman who could leave, and she left, and in a corridor by the kitchens she said six words about her own face on a wall and he laughed for the first time in eighteen years.

That was the third.

It did not stop.

This is the fourth.

SYNOPSIS

Manuchehr Delgoshā is fifty-four years old and has begun laughing, and it has ruined and remade him in the same movement.

For twenty-five years he could see the shape of a joke and never feel it land, and that was the whole of his gift — a man standing half a second ahead of every room in the country with a stopwatch. He can now do both at once. He is better than he has ever been. He is also, for the first time, obliged to feel what he sells before he sells it, and there is a great deal in his own back catalogue that he can no longer get through.

His broker of twenty-six years dies between one Tuesday and the next.

A young woman in Delft, who is the only person alive who can make him laugh, starts sending him voice notes at two in the morning, and between them they build something with a name that is half hers and half his and belongs to nobody.

And a man who will not give his name asks him for a funeral speech, and stipulates only three things: no politics, her name must be said, and it must be funny.

Ninety-one entries, one of which is twelve pages, in the shape of a treatise censored in every edition printed since. A book about what it costs to finally be able to feel it.

The dots are still not an absence.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is a particular sound a person makes when they must not laugh and are going to anyway.

It is not the laugh. The laugh is the easy part and it is the same in every country. It is the other thing — the sound of a laugh being held, which comes out of the nose at pressure because every other exit has been sealed, and which is high and thin and ugly and utterly humiliating, and which no adult has ever produced on purpose.

You will have made it. In a lecture, in a meeting, at a graveside. And you will remember exactly what your body did around it: the cheeks going, because the pressure has to be held somewhere. The head going down and never back. The hand arriving over the mouth, which people believe is to muffle the sound and which is in fact to hide the shape. The chest pulling in short hard strokes at a rate it was not built for. And then the eyes, which give the whole thing away, because a mouth can be covered and eyes answer to nobody.

Here is what I have been unable to put down for two years.

That is what grief looks like.

Precisely that. The same posture, the same muscles, the same sound. A man doubled forward in a black suit with his face in his hands and his shoulders going and his eyes streaming is either the funniest he has ever been in his life or the saddest, and there is no test available to anybody in the room, including him.

We have built a great deal of our public life on the assumption that these two things are opposites. They use the same equipment. They always have.

And in a place where a man of a certain kind is never permitted to weep in a room with the lights on, it follows that there is exactly one way to get him to do it.

I do not think that is a consoling thought. I think it is a true one,

and I have been carrying it around for two years, and this is what I have done with it.

Chew Z

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I. THE BROKER

1.

Vahid died on a Tuesday and I found out on the Thursday from a man at the print shop who assumed I already knew.

2.

Twenty-six years.

I want to put the number down before anything else because the number is the only clean thing about it. Twenty-six years, forty percent, and one instruction, which he gave me perhaps eleven thousand times.

Make it shorter.

He was wrong twice.

3.

He was sixty-one. It was his heart, which I did not know was a candidate, and which I would have known if I had ever once asked him a question about himself.

I have gone through this notebook and the two before it. In twenty-six years I have recorded what he said about my work, what he said about money, what he ordered in cafés, where he sat, and the fact that he came to my flat exactly once with two bags and four packets of biscuits and talked about a road closure.

I do not know whether he was married.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the widow what her husband had left
her. She said, a shop, a debt, and the habit of
listening for a key at seven o'clock.*

4.

The rate has done something that my mother says is *unbecoming*.

5.

His sister telephoned. She had my number in his book under *the writer*, which is not a name and which is the closest thing to a credit I have ever had in print.

She asked whether I wanted anything of his.

I said no, and then I said yes, and I do not know why I changed it, and she said come Thursday.

6.

There was a folder.

Cardboard, elastic corners, the kind you buy in the shop under the flyover with no name on it. Inside, in his hand, which I had seen perhaps forty times on the backs of envelopes: a list.

Sixty-one entries over twenty-four years, one to a line. A date, a name I do not recognise, sometimes two words about a subject, and then, at the end of every single line, in the same hand, the same word.

□□.

No.

7.

I have been through it eleven times, which is not the number.

Some of the names are people. Some are places. Some are three letters and a number and might be anything. Four of them I recognise as government and two of those I recognise as the kind of government that does not commission jokes for a laugh.

Every line has a date. The dates run from 2001 to the spring.

Every line has the word.

8.

Here is what I cannot establish and am not going to be able to establish.

Whether that is a list of work he turned down on my behalf without ever mentioning it to me, over twenty-four years, at a cost to himself of forty percent of every one of them.

Or a list of work he turned down for his own reasons, which is a different book entirely.

Or a list of something else altogether that has nothing whatever to do with me and which I have read into because a man is dead and I am holding a folder.

There is one person who could tell me and he is not available for comment.

from the Delgoshā

*A merchant kept his accounts in a hand nobody
could read. When he died his sons found the
ledgers and quarrelled for eleven years over
whether they had been rich.*

9.

I have decided to believe the first one.

I want that written down as a decision, in this hand, on this date, so that when I am eighty and it has hardened into a fact I will be able to come back and see the exact moment I chose it.

10.

[voice note, 02:41, 6 min 09 s]

okay so I heard and I'm not going to do the thing where I say sorry for your loss because you'd hate it and also I met him twice and both times he tried to charge me for a conversation

but listen — no listen — I want to tell you what he did

when I called you the first time about the speech he could have just given me your number and he didn't he made me sit in a café for forty minutes and he asked me what it was for and who was going to say it and where and he asked me if anybody had leaned on me to ask for it

I thought he was being an asshole I thought he was doing the gatekeeper thing

he was checking

he was checking whether I was going to get you killed and he was doing it in a way where if I'd been the wrong kind of person I'd have thought he was just greedy

so that's who he was and I only worked it out on the metro afterwards and I never told you and now I'm telling you at half two in the morning like a psychopath

anyway

I'm sorry about your friend

11.

He never said friend and neither did I and she is twenty-four and said it in a voice note at half past two without thinking about it at all.

12.

The pharmacy man asked after my mother by name. His daughter is teaching. I have known him eleven years.

13.

There is nobody to send anything to.

That is the practical fact of the month and it has taken four weeks to arrive properly. I write something in the chair at three in the morning and at nine there is nobody to telephone, and I stand in the kitchen with it, and the flat is the same flat.

I had assumed for twenty-six years that the forty percent was for the selling.

It was for the nine o'clock.

14.

They have announced that the situation is under control. Nobody had said it was not.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the porter what he carried. He said,
other men's things, to other men's houses, for other
men's reasons. They asked what he owned. He said,
the road.*

15.

I went to the metro at the hour he works.

He is still there. Nail clippers, cables, insoles, socks. Twenty-six years on the same run and the six minutes are still six minutes, the complaint is still the hook, the callback still goes into the tunnel.

I bought socks. That makes fourteen.

He said the price is the same as last month and this is not going to continue.

He has been saying that for eleven years.

16.

Here is what has changed and I have put off writing it down.

I now feel them.

Not the room in front of me. There is no room in front of me and there never has been. I mean the joke, when it goes off, wherever it goes off, in a body I have never met — and I feel it in my own chest, in the middle, under the breastbone, where the warmth starts.

At four in the morning. In a chair. Alone.

17.

It began after the corridor and I put it down to the corridor and did not write about it for a year and a half.

I am writing about it now because it has stopped being occasional.

18.

I want to be extremely careful here, because I have watched myself reason badly about exactly this kind of thing for four years, and because I am a man who takes a syrup every night at ten to eleven and has done since he was twenty-eight, and because a nephrologist told me in ninety seconds in traffic what that does and in what order, and was right about all of it.

So. Plainly. It is not a vision. There are no pictures. Nothing is set down in front of me and nothing speaks.

It is a physical sensation in the chest, of about a second and a half, of the specific kind that a laugh has when it starts — the beginning of it, without the rest — and it arrives at moments when I am not doing anything and am not thinking about anything and have often forgotten what I wrote.

And it arrives in **quantities**. Not one. Six, or twenty, or something that is not a countable number at all and feels more like a pressure.

19.

I have started noting the nights.

II. FORTY ROOMS

20.

A boy of about twenty came to the print shop and asked for me by a name I have never used and did not correct.

He said there is a room in Piroozi on Wednesdays. He said there are eleven of us and none of us can write.

He said: we can't pay you.

I said: I know.

21.

I have thought about why I said yes and the honest account is that I said yes before I thought about anything.

The considered account, which arrived four days later in the chair, is this.

A twenty-two-year-old from Javadiyeh spent five years supplying four departments and a hospital at a margin she described to me as *enough*, and when I asked her why she did not charge properly she said: **if I take proper money off them they stop being able to afford it and then I've solved nothing.**

I have thought about that sentence more than any sentence anybody has said to me since 1989.

I am fifty-four. I have taken forty percent off the top of everything I have ever made, or rather somebody has taken it for me, and I have never once given anything away.

22.

So: Piroozi on Wednesdays, eleven of them, no money.

And then Narmak. And then two rooms in Karaj and one in a hostel off Enghelab where they take the beds out on Thursdays and put them back on Friday.

And then it went, the way a thing goes.

from the Delgoshā

*The teacher gave his lessons free and was thought
to have nothing worth charging for. When he died
the town found it had eleven scholars and no idea
where they had come from.*

23.

It is forty rooms.

I do not know that it is forty. I have not counted and there is no list and there could not be a list. It is what I say when somebody asks and it is what I have written here, and I am aware of what I am doing and I have written that down too.

24.

[voice note, 01:58, 3 min 40 s]

so I did the Utrecht room last night and it went fine it went completely fine and that's the problem

they laughed in all the right places and afterwards a man came up and said it was very brave

brave

I did four minutes about my mother's gold and a man in a very good coat told me I was brave and I said thank you and I went outside and stood by a canal like a person in a film

nothing I say costs anything here

that's not a complaint I know exactly how that sounds from where you're sitting I know

but the material was built for a room where the material was dangerous and here it's just *interesting* and interesting is death

I need you to write me something that's dangerous *here*

I don't know what that is yet

25.

They have begun calling me something.

I am not going to write it down. It came out of the Karaj room and it has spread the way everything spreads, which is to say instantly and with nobody responsible, and I have now heard it said in a corridor by a boy who did not know I was standing there. It is not a

nickname. It is a title, and it is a religious one, and it is meant affectionately and as a joke.

I have asked them to stop. They will not stop. A room that has decided what to call you is a room that has stopped asking.

from the Delgoshā

*A man gave bread at his gate each morning without
asking names. In the tenth year the beggars
organised, elected a representative, and came to
complain about the quality.*

26.

The nights I have noted, and the nights I have checked.

I write something at three or four. Some days later I feel it — the second and a half, the quantity — and I write down the hour.

Then, if I can, I find out where the material went and when it was said.

Nineteen times now. Of the nineteen, fifteen sit within about two hours of a room I can establish.

27.

And here is what is wrong with that and I am going to state it against myself as clearly as I can.

I only check the ones I remember. I remember the ones where I felt something. Remembering is downstream of expecting. I have four years of watching myself do exactly this and I have written entire entries about a second notebook that lives in a drawer because keeping it in the drawer was more information than anything in it.

Fifteen of nineteen is not evidence. It is a man with a pen and a preference.

28.

And I have not stopped.

29.

My mother telephoned to describe a funeral she attended in Shahr-e Rey.

The son of the deceased spoke for six minutes. He was, she says, extremely sincere and completely unbearable, and he wept twice, and both times it was at a point in the story where the woman he was describing had done something for him.

She said: he cried about the sandwiches.

I said: what? She said: she made him sandwiches for eleven years and he cried about the sandwiches and he did not say her name

once, not once, and I have known that woman since 1971 and I sat in that hall and I could not remember her name either.

30.

I wrote that down while she was still speaking.

I am not going to stop doing that and I have stopped pretending to myself that I might.

31.

The syrup has been reformulated again. The cap in the drawer with the batteries has never been used.

32.

Friday. My father is eighty-three. He read every page to the bottom and back to check something in the middle and said this is good work.

Thirty-three years of Fridays.

Four places.

At the door he held my arm above the elbow and said: you are sleeping?

I said yes.

He said: hm.

from the Delgoshā

*The physician told him the remedy would cost him
his hearing. He asked what he would gain. The
physician said, you will no longer be troubled by
the noise.*

33.

[voice note, 03:22, 7 min 51 s]

right I've got it I've been walking around Delft for two hours in the rain and I've got it

we don't sell the jokes

we sell the *not knowing*

listen — every comic here has a name and a face and an agent and a specialist and everybody knows exactly who wrote what and it's all so clean and it's all so *boring* and the second anybody knows who wrote a thing they've stopped listening to it and started listening to the person

so we don't tell them

we don't tell anybody

we put out material under one name and the name isn't a person and there's no face and there's no interview and there's no origin story and we never ever say

and they'll go mad

they'll go absolutely mad and every room in Europe will spend two years arguing about who it is and every single one of those arguments is free advertising and none of them will ever be right

and here's the bit I like

you can keep working

you can sit in your terrible chair in Tehran and give it away for free to forty rooms and nobody can ever prove anything and I'm on a stage in Antwerp with a microphone and the same brain behind me

we're the same person

we've been the same person since the corridor and you know it

what do we call it

34.

I said her name and then my name and then I put them together and heard it.

ROMANU.

I said it out loud in the flat, once, and then I sat in the chair for some time with my hand over my mouth like a man in a hall.

35.

She has her half at the front where you say it first. I have mine at the back, where it is doing the work and where nobody looking at the word would ever separate it out.

I suggested it. That is on the record and I want it there.

I have known why for four days and I am not going to write it down.

III. THE NAME AT THE DOOR

36.

The first man telephoned and said there was a gentleman who wished to commission something and would not discuss it on a line.

The second man met me at a café I did not choose and asked whether I would consider work of a personal nature.

The third man collected me in a car.

37.

The car was very clean and eleven years old and expensive when new, which is a specific choice made by a specific kind of person, and the driver was not the man.

The man was in the back and he was about sixty and he did not offer his name and I did not ask for it, and there is a manner that certain people have — an entire absence of the small apparatus of ordinary politeness, not rudely, just an economy — and he had it.

We drove for forty minutes and did not stop anywhere.

38.

He said his mother had died on Tuesday.

He said the tarhim [tar-HEEM] is at the mosque on the fourteenth and there will be about two hundred.

He said: I want you to write what I say.

I said: I don't do speeches.

He said: you wrote the one at Sharif.

from the Delgoshā

*A rich man asked the poet for a verse and would
not say for whom. The poet wrote it for himself and
gave it to him, and it fitted, and this is why poets
are not trusted.*

39.

I did not answer that and he did not push it, and we drove for a while, and then he gave me the three conditions and he gave them in this order, without preamble, looking out of the window.

No politics.

Not a line. Not a gesture at one. He said it with a flatness that I have thought about since, as though politics were the cheap option and he had expected better of me. He said: everybody does politics. It is the easiest thing in the world and it will get us nowhere and it will make the afternoon about me.

Her name is to be said.

He said that one twice.

And then he looked at me for the first time in forty minutes and said:

It has to be funny.

40.

I said: it's a funeral.

He said: I know what it is.

I said: for your mother.

He said: yes.

And then he looked back out of the window and that was the end of the conversation and we drove for eleven more minutes in silence and the driver let me out four streets from where I live, which was courteous and was also a message.

41.

The money arrived two days later and it was wrong.

Not wrong in the sense of a mistake. Wrong in the sense that it was four times what the job is worth and had been sent in a way that made returning it awkward and conspicuous, and that a man who does not want to be argued with sends money like that on purpose.

I have thought about that number for three weeks and I understand it now and I did not understand it then.

It was not payment. It was pressure. He was buying the certainty that I would try.

from the Delgoshā

*A man paid the poet ten times the price of the
verse. Asked why, he said, I did not wish him to
write it well. I wished him to be unable to sleep
until he had.*

42.

Her name is Robabeh.

I found it in the notice, on the fourth line, in brackets, after her husband's name and her father's name and the names of both her sons.

She is in her own death notice as a relationship.

43.

I want to set down what I did for the first four days, because it is the only useful thing in this notebook for anybody who ever has to do this.

I did not write a joke.

I found out what she was like. I could not ask him and there was nobody else to ask, so I went to the street.

I went to the district and I stood in a bakery for an hour and I said her name to three women and one of them started talking and did not stop for twenty minutes, and I wrote down every word of it on the back of two envelopes and a receipt.

Everything in the speech that works came off those envelopes. The gold. The uncle. The water heater. The halva. The instrument.

I did not write that speech. I collected it and put it in an order. That is what the job is and it took me twenty-five years and a woman in a bakery to find out.

44.

The halva line came from the third woman and she gave it to me without knowing she had.

She said: she made it for this street for forty years and today somebody else made hers.

And then she said, and this is the part I did not put in and could not have improved: *and it isn't as good, and I feel terrible saying that.*

45.

The water heater came from a man outside a shop who had not been asked anything and who joined a conversation he was not in, which is the most reliable source of material in the world.

46.

[voice note, 01:14, 2 min 33 s]

a funeral

you've been given a *funeral*

okay so the thing about a funeral — no listen, this is important — the thing about a funeral is it's the only room in the country where everybody's already broken

at a wedding they're defended at a graduation they're defended in a theatre they've paid so they're defended

at a funeral they've been sitting on it for four days and they've been holding their face for four days and they are *right there*

you don't have to open them

you have to give them somewhere to put it

47.

She said that at ten past one in the morning, in about eleven seconds, with her mouth full, walking somewhere.

It is the single most useful piece of professional instruction I have received in my working life and she has never given a speech, never written one, and has performed for a total of about nine hours.

48.

I built it in nineteen days.

Ten pages. Seven movements. The name at the top and the name at the bottom and the name at the door.

I called it **NOT FOR EXPORT** for four days and then took that off because I had used it before, and because a title is a thing I put on a page out of habit for nobody, and because this one was going to be said out loud by a man in a room and did not need one. The page in my drawer says only: □□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□.

Export forbidden? No.

Which is a private joke of the worst kind and I am not going to explain it.

49.

I was not in the room.

He did not invite me and I did not ask and it did not occur to either of us that I would be there, which is the arrangement, and which I have never once questioned in twenty-five years and which I questioned for about four seconds on the fourteenth at half past three in the afternoon while standing in my kitchen.

50.

What follows is the address as delivered, from a recording, with my notes.

I was not there. The notes are therefore reconstruction and not observation, and I have marked nothing I could not hear.

THE	NAME	AT	THE	DOOR
<i>(commissioned; delivered as: a few words from the family</i>				
<i>before</i>		<i>Haj</i>	<i>Agha)</i>	

Robabeh Khanoom died on Tuesday.

I have put her name first because it will not be said again this afternoon, and I would like it in the room early, while there is still tea.

He opens on the client's one condition and gets it out inside eleven words. I wrote four other openings. This is the only one that does the job in the first breath, and it is the only one that is not funny, and I have spent three

weeks learning that a room will give you the first fifteen seconds for nothing and charge you for everything after.

The notice in the paper carried four names. My father's. Her father's. Mine. My brother's. She appeared in her own death notice as a relationship.

And there is the first laugh, and it is a bad one — the short ugly one a room makes when it recognises something it has done. Somebody's chair goes. That is the correct sound and I built for it, and I could not have built for it two years ago because I would not have felt it.

I want to thank you all for coming, and I want to thank the people who have been in our house since Tuesday, and I want to particularly thank whoever brought the enormous quantity of dates, because we now have more dates than grief, and the dates will last longer.

Haj Agha will speak after me and he will speak beautifully.

I want to say something about him first, because I am about to make a joke at his expense and I would like the record straight before I do it. He has buried four hundred people in this district. He has never once taken money from a family that could not pay. He came to our house at two in the morning on Tuesday and he came in his own car.

He is a good man and I owe him more than I can say and I want that said in this room by somebody who owes him nothing.

Never do the joke first. You buy the man before you spend him. If the room does not believe your affection you are not a satirist, you are a nephew with a grievance, and everyone can hear the difference.

Now.

When Haj Agha speaks, he will address the sisters in the other hall. He will do this while looking at a point roughly

two metres above their heads, which is where he has been
looking at women since 1974.

Which is why, in fifty years of ministry, he has never once
had to see one.

He is not a bad man. He is an extremely good man with a
very slight problem with his neck.

*Eight seconds, and it climbs at the end, because the last
clause lets them off. They are not laughing at a cleric.
They are laughing at a neck. Every man in that hall has
looked at a woman that way this week and not one of
them has to admit it, because the joke has kindly
provided them with an orthopaedic explanation.*

*That is the whole trade. You do not make a room
confess. You make it laugh at the shape of the thing it is
standing in, and then it has to carry that home.*

The men are in this hall. The women are through that door.

I want to note, as a matter of record and without further
comment, that this hall has the chairs with the backs.

*Nothing after it. Not one word. It is the shortest thing in
the speech and it is the only line I have written in
twenty-five years that I would put on a wall.*

There will be a maddahi in about forty minutes.

Karbala. A man died in the year 680 and he is going to be
getting his portion of this afternoon whether or not anybody
in this room ever met him.

My mother raised six children through a war, a revolution
and two currencies, and she is going to have to share.

*And there — that is the biggest of the afternoon by some
distance, and I was not in the room, and I have listened
to a recording of it eleven times.*

*Everybody at every funeral in this country for four
hundred years has thought that and not one of them has*

*said it, and it is not blasphemy and it is not even
irreverence. It is a complaint about the running order.*

That is not disrespect to the Imam. That is a scheduling observation.

*The tag. Always give them the exit. The joke is the door
and the tag is the handle, and a room that cannot get
out will not go through.*

I have been to a great many of these. I have never once been to one for a woman where the speech was about the woman.

I have been to eleven where the speech was about death in general, four where it was about the other world, and one, in Karaj, where the gentleman speaking got approximately nine minutes into a beautiful address about the transience of earthly attachment before it emerged that he had been given the wrong name.

He recovered well. He simply started saying *the deceased*. He said it forty times. I counted, because I had nothing else to do, because I did not know the woman either, and I had been brought along by my brother-in-law.

That was somebody's mother and there were two hundred of us in the room and by the end of it she was *the deceased*.

*He is landing the argument as an anecdote and nobody
in that hall has noticed he has made an argument. They
think he is telling them about a funeral in Karaj.*

Right. My brother will speak after Haj Agha, and I am going to spoil his speech, because I know what he is going to say.

He is going to say she was patient.

That is the word. It is always the word. It is on the stones. Go out into Behesht-e Zahra and walk the women's rows and count how many of them were patient.

Sabur. Six hundred thousand women a year in this country, and every single one of them, without exception, patient.

Not one of them was ever funny.

Not one of them was difficult.

Not one of them was ever in the middle of something.

Rule of three and the third one is the smallest. Funny, difficult, in the middle of something. The first two are jokes and the third is a knife, and it goes in on the laugh from the second, which is the only way a knife goes into a room this size.

My mother was not patient.

My mother was the most impatient human being I have ever met.

She was impatient because she was right, and she was right roughly ninety percent of the time, and she was living in a house where being right did not entitle her to anything at all.

And I want to explain something to the men in this hall, because I have worked it out very late and I am not going to be the only one.

Being right in a house where nobody is listening looks exactly like patience from the outside.

That face. The one you have all seen. The one at the end of the table.

That was not serenity.

You have been misreading that face for fifty years.

Silence. Not a pause — the other thing, where two hundred people stop at once and the room's temperature changes and there is a noise from the hall through the door because they can hear this too.

I built that on the eleventh night and I could not have built it before the corridor. Not because it is clever — it is not clever, it is one sentence. Because to build it I had to feel it land on myself first, and for twenty-five years I could not feel anything land, and so I would have written it colder and it would have been worse and nobody would have made that noise.

*This is what the laugh cost me and what it bought. I do
not think it is a good trade. I think it is a trade.*

Let me give you the evidence, because I am the eldest and I
have it.

In 1979 my mother told my father not to sell the shop.
He sold the shop.

*And here it starts. He has switched into a list and the
room does not know yet that it is in one. A list is a
machine — you set the interval, you keep the interval,
and the interval does the work while the material gets
shorter.*

In 1988 she told him not to move the money.
He moved the money.

In 1994 she told my uncle — who is here, and who is going to
have a difficult twenty minutes — that the partner was a
thief.

Uncle. You know how this ends. You were in our kitchen in
1997 and you cried, and she made you tea, and she said
nothing about it, and she said nothing about it for
twenty-eight years.

The not-saying was the loudest thing that woman ever did.

*Six seconds and a chair goes over near the wall. Never
point at the person. Point at the kitchen.*

In 2003 she said the boy was lying.

The boy was lying. The boy is now forty-four and is standing
at the back and knows exactly what I am talking about.

*Four seconds. Shorter than the last. The intervals are
closing and nobody has noticed.*

In 2011 she said do not put the water heater there.

*He stops. Two and a half seconds of nothing, which at
this point in a build is an eternity and which I would not
have had the nerve to write.*

The water heater is still there.

Two seconds.

It has never worked.

One and a half.

Nobody has moved it. Because moving it now would mean she was right. And this family would rather be cold.

And that should have been the end of the run. That is a closer. I wrote it as a closer. I built four beats up to it and I put the word cold on the end because cold is a hard consonant and it stops a room.

He did not stop. He waited exactly as long as I would have waited, and he let them start, and then he came in over the top of it while they were still going, which is the single most dangerous thing you can do to a room and which no professional would attempt in front of a deputy minister let alone a mosque.

Every man in this hall has a water heater.

I have listened to the next ninety seconds eleven times and I am going to write down what is on the recording, in order, because it is the most extraordinary thing I have ever heard and because nobody else in this country would know what they were listening to.

The first sound is one exhalation through the nose. Somewhere near the front, on the left. Just air — a man who has closed his mouth and had nowhere else to put it, and it comes out of him at pressure through a passage the width of a pencil, and it is loud, and everybody hears it, and that is the door coming off.

Then the coughs. Four of them inside three seconds, from four different parts of the hall, and not one of them is a cough. That is the manoeuvre — you convert it in the throat and route it out as something respectable, and it works for about one second and then you have to do it again.

Then the chairs. Not people standing. People bracing. A man leaning forward and putting his forearms on his knees so that his shoulders have somewhere to go, and forty chairs doing it at once sounds like weather.

Then the hands. You can hear a hand go over a mouth on a recording. It is a flat soft sound and it happens twice near the microphone, and after that it is happening everywhere. Then — and this is the part — the high note.

When the mouth is shut and the throat is shut and the diaphragm goes anyway, the air leaves at the top of the register through the nose, and it is a thin ugly squeak, and it is the most humiliating sound a grown man can produce. There are nine of them in eleven seconds. Nine men in a mosque hall, in black, at a funeral, squeaking.

And a tea glass. Somebody's glass on a saucer, going, for four seconds, because the hand holding it has stopped being available. I know precisely what that is. It happened to me in a corridor by the kitchens two years ago and I had to put the cup down.

What is happening in that room, physically, to two hundred men at once:

The cheeks go first — they balloon, because the mouth is sealed and the pressure has to be held somewhere, and a man's face does something at that moment that he would never permit if he could see it.

The head goes down. Always down, never back. Back is for laughing in public and down is for laughing where you must not.

The hand comes up over the mouth, and it is not to muffle the sound. It is to hide the shape.

The chest goes up and down in short hard pulls, four or five a second, which is a big muscle firing at a frequency it was never designed for, and it hurts, and it is going to hurt tomorrow.

And the eyes go. That is the one that finishes you. The mouth can be covered and the shoulders can be excused and the eyes cannot be governed by anybody. They water, and then they run, and there is nothing whatsoever that any man in that hall can do about it.

And here is what he has done, and I did not see it until the fourth listen, and I have not been able to put it down since.

Two hundred men, doubled forward, faces covered, shoulders going, eyes streaming, in a mosque, at a funeral. And it is indistinguishable from grief.

It is the same posture. It is the same muscles. It is the identical sound. There is not a person alive who could walk into that hall at that moment and tell you which of those two hundred men was laughing and which was weeping, and — this is the thing — neither could they.

He has built the one room in this country where a man of that class is permitted to break in public, and he has given every one of them a complete and unchallengeable alibi for it.

That is why the money was wrong. That is why a man like that came to a man like me through three intermediaries and would not give his name and said, twice, in a car, that it had to be funny.

He did not want it funny for his mother.

He wanted his father to be able to cry, and his uncle, and the four hundred men who buried her, and the only way to make men of that kind cry in a room with the lights on is to make them laugh so hard that nobody can tell the difference. Including them.

I have been in this trade twenty-five years. I have never once used it for that and it never occurred to me that it could be used for that, and a man I have never met and will never meet worked it out on his own and then paid a stranger to build it.

He waited fifty-one seconds. I timed it. He stood at the lectern and let them have it and did not once try to get it back.

My mother would have hated this.
She would have hated all of it. She would have hated the flowers and she would have hated the cost of the flowers and she would have found out the cost of the flowers.

And a second wave, smaller, and this one has the wet catch in it, because the first one has left them entirely undefended.

Her name is Robabeh. It is an instrument.
A rubab is a stringed thing you hold against you and play with a bow, and it does not sound like anything else, and people describe the tone as *complaining*.
My grandfather named her that in 1946, in a house in Semnan, and I have no idea what he was thinking, and there is nobody left to ask.
She was named after an instrument.
And in seventy-nine years, nobody ever asked her to play.

Nine words. No joke in it and no joke anywhere near it and it is the only place in ten pages that has none.

And he put it there — not in the quiet part, where I had it — but here, straight into the back of the biggest laugh of the afternoon, while two hundred men are wide open and have already got their faces in their hands and have already got wet eyes and no longer have any way of telling themselves what the wet eyes are for.

I had it on page four. He moved it to page nine.

He is not a writer. He has never done this. He moved it because he knew that room and I did not, and it is the best editorial decision anybody has ever made to my work, and there is no version of this notebook in which I do not write that down.

Now.

The

halva.

Somebody has made the halva today and I do not know who, and I want to thank them, and it is not as good.

It is not as good because my mother made the halva for this street for forty years. For every funeral on this road. She made it for your mothers and she made it for your fathers, and several of you in this hall have eaten my mother's halva at your own family's funerals with no idea whose hands it came out of, because it arrived at the door in a covered dish with no name on it. Which is how she did everything.

There is an expression. *You can smell his halva coming.* It means a man has not got long.

For forty years, in this district, the smell of that halva meant my mother was already awake.

Four seconds of hold before the last line. I would have taken two. He was right and I was wrong and I have been counting laughs from four rows back for twenty-five years, and this is the first time I have conceded a timing note to somebody who has done it once.

My father called her khanoom for fifty-one years.

That is not a name. That is a form of address. It is what you call a woman whose name you have decided you do not need.

He is here. He is eighty-four. He is in the front row. He is not a cruel man and he does not know what I am talking about, and if I sat him down afterwards and explained it he would be genuinely sorry and would not understand.

Baba. It is all right. It was the water. Everybody was drinking it.

That is the only line I would take out.

It is a good joke. It got seven seconds. It is also the moment he lets the room off, and himself, and his father, and every man in that hall, all at once, with a

metaphor about drinking water — and it is the one place where he goes down instead of up.

I did not write it. He put it in. And I have thought about it for a week and I still think it is the wrong call, and I understand exactly why he made it, and if he had asked me I would have said cut it, and if he had cut it his father would have had to sit in that chair with nothing.

So it stays in. It is his mother.

I am nearly finished, and then Haj Agha will speak, and he will speak better than me and about more important things. Three instructions and I will sit down.

One. In about ninety minutes we will all stand at that door and you will come past us, and you will say the six words, and I will say the four words back. It is the only conversation in Persian that has never once, in fourteen hundred years, been improvised.

When you get to me, do not say the six words. Say her name. Say *Robabeh Khanoom* and say one thing she did. Anything. It does not have to be large. She lent you a pot. She told you your son was lying, and he was. She was rude to you in 1988 and she was right.

Two. The stone is being cut this week. I have seen the drawing. The drawing says *mother of*.

I have sent it back.

Three seconds and then applause, at a tarhim, which does not happen, and which several of them stop doing almost immediately because they have remembered where they are and cannot work out whether it is permitted.

Three. To the sisters in the other hall, who have heard every word of this through a door, standing, because there are not enough chairs.

I am sorry about the chairs.

I have been coming to this mosque for forty years and I have never once thought about the chairs. I thought about them for the first time three weeks ago, when a man I have never met asked me a question about my mother that I could not answer.

That is the whole speech. That is everything I have. Her name was Robabeh. She was named after an instrument. She was right about nearly everything, and she was not patient.

Thank you for coming. There is tea, and there are a very great many dates.

The room stood, which does not happen at a tarhim, and I have ninety seconds of recording of two hundred men in a mosque hall not knowing what to do with their hands.

I was not there for it. I have never met him, I do not know his name, I am not going to be told it, and the money came through a third party in a way I did not enjoy.

But I went to the door afterwards, because I could not not go, and I stood in that queue with a paper cup.

And a man in front of me told the one about the neck to the man beside him. Eleven minutes after hearing it. He got the words wrong and he put the funny part in the middle and it worked anyway, and the man beside him laughed — properly, out loud, at a funeral, and then covered his mouth, and then had to turn and face the wall.

Neither of them will ever know where it came from. By Thursday it will be in four provinces.

I stood there and watched a sentence leave me at the actual speed, in the actual room, for the first time in my life.

It took eleven minutes.

IV. ROMANU

51.

Fifty-one seconds.

I have it on the recording and I have timed it eleven times and it is fifty-one seconds, and that is not a laugh, that is a room failing to contain one, which is a different physical event and lasts about four times as long.

52.

I want to set down what I understood on the fourth listen, because I did not understand it on the first three and because it is the largest thing that has happened to me professionally.

Two hundred men, doubled forward, faces in their hands, shoulders going, eyes running, in a mosque, at a funeral.

It is the same as grief.

Not similar. The same. The same posture, the same muscle groups, the same breathing, the same sound coming through the same closed throat. If you walked into that hall at minute forty you could not have told me which of those men were laughing and which were weeping.

And neither could they.

53.

He gave four hundred men who are not permitted to cry in a room with the lights on the only alibi available in this culture.

That is what the money was for. That is why it had to be funny and why it could not be political, because political would have made the room about him and would have given every man in it something to have an opinion about instead of something to do with his face.

The funny was never for her.

He wanted his father able to weep in a mosque, in a chair, in the front row, at eighty-four, in front of the men he has known since 1974 — and there is exactly one way to arrange that, and a man

who has never written anything worked it out on his own and paid a stranger four times the rate to build it.

54.

Twenty-five years.

I have used this to sell soap. I have used it to fill a television slot on a Thursday. I have used it to bury a story about my brother.

It did not once occur to me that it could be used for that.

55.

He did not contact me afterwards and he is not going to.

56.

They have announced that the committee reviewing the Vision will report in the spring. This is the fourth spring.

from the Delgoshā

*The mourners were paid by the hour and wept
beautifully. The son wept badly and without
payment and was asked to sit down.*

57.

[voice note, 00:41, 9 min 02 s]

okay so I've done the thing

I've done the thing don't be angry

I put out four pieces this month under the name and I didn't say who and I didn't say where and I didn't do an interview and I have said absolutely nothing to anybody

and there are now — I'm going to read this to you — there are now three separate threads arguing about who Romanu is

thread one says it's a collective in Berlin

thread two says it's a woman in Toronto and they have a *shortlist*, they've got four names, one of them is a novelist who's been dead since 2019

thread three — and I want you to sit down — thread three says it's a man in Karaj

Karaj

somebody has decided it's a man in Karaj and forty people have agreed with them and one of them has apparently met him

you're a man in Karaj now

I've never been so happy in my life

58.

There are eleven versions of who I am and none of them is me and all of them are working, and I have spent twenty-five years being nobody and it turns out the trick was to be nobody *loudly*.

from the Delgoshā

*The counterfeiter was so skilled that in the end the
mint sent for his coins to compare against their
own, and were embarrassed.*

59.

The rooms have started asking for Romanu material by name.

They do not know it is me. I bring it in on paper the way I have brought material in for two years and they take it and I say nothing, and last Wednesday in Piroozi a boy of twenty told me, kindly, that if I wanted to get better I should study Romanu.

I said I would look into it.

60.

That is the funniest thing that has happened to me in my adult life and I could not laugh at it, and I mean that precisely: I felt it arrive, in the chest, correctly, and then something in the throat closed on the way and it did not come out, and I have no idea what that was and it has not happened since.

61.

[voice note, 04:03, 5 min 12 s]

they've offered me the tour

it's not — okay before you say anything it's not headline, I'm not headline, I'm third, there are two names above mine and one of them is very good and the other one I'm not going to say anything about because you'll repeat it

it's a Netflix thing it's eleven cities it's four months

and I said yes obviously I said yes

and I'm sitting on the floor of my flat at four in the morning and I want to tell you the actual feeling because you'll want it for something

it isn't happiness

it's the feeling of a door being held open by somebody who is not looking at you and who will let go of it at some point and won't announce when

that's it that's the whole thing anyway I'm third and the poster is very small and my mother has already sent it to eleven people

62.

Third on the bill. Eleven cities. Four months.

She is twenty-four and she came ninth out of six hundred thousand and she is going to be very large indeed and it has not happened yet, and I would like it recorded, in this hand, on this date, that I knew.

63.

My mother telephoned to say she had been sent something by Mrs Nikkhah's daughter, on the telephone, of a girl doing comedy in Holland.

She said: she is very rude.

I said: is she funny.

She said: she is very rude. And then, after a moment: yes.

64.

I have not told her. I have not told either of them.

There is a version of this month in which I sit in my father's front room on a Friday and explain that the thing my mother has been sent on a telephone by a neighbour's daughter is half mine.

I have run that conversation four times in the chair and it does not survive the second sentence, because the second sentence is *and the other half is a woman of twenty-four in Delft*, and the third sentence does not exist.

65.

The syrup at ten to eleven. The nose at twelve minutes past, as it has for twenty-seven years. The warmth at half past, with its opinions. And then the other thing, which now happens most nights, and which I have written about badly three times and am going to try once more.

It is not that I imagine the rooms. I have never had any difficulty imagining a room; that is the trade and I could do it at nine.

It is that the imagining has stopped being necessary.

66.

Six of them last night. I wrote down the hour.

Two of them I have since placed — Piroozi at ten past nine, and a hostel off Enghelab that runs late, at about eleven.

Four of them I have not placed and am not going to be able to.

67.

I am fifty-four years old and I take a codeine syrup nightly and have done since I was twenty-eight and a doctor once told me in a car in traffic what that does and in what order and was right about every part of it.

I write that at the bottom of every one of these entries now, in the same words, as a kind of discipline.

It has not made any difference to what I do next.

from the Delgoshā

*A man swore he could hear the grass grow. They
put him in a room without windows for a year.
When they let him out he said, it has been a poor
season, and it had.*

V. STOP

68.

The rate. My mother says it has begun keeping company.

69.

I have been through the folder again and there is a line dated the eleventh of March 2019 with no name on it at all. Just a place, four letters, and the word.

Two days before the basement.

I have looked at that line for four weeks and I am not going to be able to do anything with it and I am writing it here so that it exists somewhere outside my own head.

70.

[voice note, 02:55, 1 min 08 s]

hey

no reason

just — I did a room tonight and there was a bit where they went and I felt you standing at the back of my own head with a stopwatch going *that was a beat and a half too long*

and it was

it was a beat and a half too long

goodnight you awful man

71.

Fourteen pairs of socks.

72.

She was at the back of the room in Narmak on a Wednesday and I did not know her and she did not introduce herself.

She did nine minutes and the third of them was material of mine — Romanu material, off a sheet I had brought in myself three weeks before and handed to a boy of twenty. She did it better than it is.

73.

Afterwards she was outside with a cigarette she was not smoking, and I said the only thing I could think of, which was that I had seen four minutes of her on a telephone seven years ago and had watched it four times.

She said: everybody's seen the four minutes.

I said: your callback goes into the tunnel.

And she looked at me properly for the first time and said: what do you mean *the tunnel*.

74.

So I told her about the man on the metro. The six minutes, the complaint as hook, the third beat about money, the callback timed into the nine seconds where the noise comes up, landing in the silence afterwards.

And she listened all the way to the end without interrupting, which nobody does, and then she said:

Naneh Sarma.

I said I know.

She said: no. The story. Do you know the story.

75.

I said everybody knows the story. She waits all year for Amu Nowruz [a-MOO now-ROOZ], she cleans the house, she dresses, she sits down to wait, she falls asleep. He comes, he finds her sleeping, he leaves flowers, he goes. She wakes up and he has gone. Every year. For ever.

She said: that is the version they tell children.

76.

Here is what she told me, outside a room in Narmak, at half past eleven at night, with a cigarette she was not smoking.

She said her grandmother had it from her grandmother.

She does not fall asleep.

Somebody has to be asleep at the moment the year turns. Somebody has to not see it. That is the price and it has always been the price, and one year, a very long time ago, she said she would pay it.

So that the spring could arrive at all.

She has paid it every year since.

And he has never been told.

He thinks he keeps missing her. He has spent eternity feeling slightly guilty about a woman who is doing him a favour.

77.

I said: why does she not tell him.

She said: because then he would know what it costs, and then he would try to give it back, and then there would be no spring.

78.

Then I told her about the chest.

I had not intended to tell anybody. I have written it down eleven times in this notebook and shown it to nobody and had no expectation of ever doing so, and I told a woman I had met forty minutes earlier, outside a basement, in the street.

She did not ask me a single question.

She let me finish and then she said: how many rooms are you giving to.

I said forty. I said I have not counted.

She said: yes. That is it. That is what it is.

79.

She has had it for years. Longer than me. She has been in those rooms since she was nineteen and she has never had a word for it and has never told anybody either, for the same reason, which is

that there is no way to say it that does not sound like the other thing.

And then she gave me the frame, and the frame is the story, and I am going to write it down in her words as closely as I can remember them.

The one who is not in the room is the one who is in all the rooms.

That is not a gift, she said. That is what the price buys. You do not get to be in the room and to feel the room. Those are the two halves and you chose, and you chose a long time ago, and you have been drawing on it ever since.

80.

I said: when did I choose.

She said: I don't know. You do.

81.

I was nine. It was a wedding. There were four hundred people and an uncle telling a story, and I knew the end of it four sentences early, and everybody laughed and I felt nothing, and I thought for two years that they were being polite.

I have written that down in three notebooks across seven years and I have never once called it a choice.

82.

I asked her whether she believed it.

She said: I've been doing this since I was nineteen. Ask me something I can answer.

And then she described a room in Karaj in 2011 — the chairs, where the door was, what the sound did against the ceiling when it came back — for about ninety seconds, in detail, accurately, and never came near the question, and when she finished she looked at me and waited.

I said: thank you.

She said: not at all.

83.

She is fifty-eight. She has been performing in basements for thirty-nine years under a name that is a joke about a woman who misses the one person she is waiting for, every year, for ever.

She chose it at nineteen because she thought it was funny about her love life.

She is the only person in this entire account who understood what she was choosing.

84.

The tour starts in Rotterdam on the eleventh.

from the Delgoshā

..... asked,
.. And the were not told.

85.

Friday. He read every page. He did not laugh.

At the door he held my arm above the elbow and did not say anything at all, and I stood on the step for a moment after he had shut it.

Four places.

86.

Vahid's sister sent the rest of the folder. There was nothing else in it.

87.

Twenty to eleven. The chair, the radio at the volume where you can hear a man is talking, the bottle, the cap in the drawer with the batteries.

The nose at twelve minutes past. The warmth at half past, with its opinions.

And at three the room went quiet, and something set a joke down in front of me, complete, with the funny word already in the last position.

And I took it down. And then I felt it.

Both. In that order. Two seconds apart.

For twenty-five years I had one of those and I would have told you, professionally, that the other was not available to a person who does this work.

88.

I do not know what I am now.

89.

Six rooms last night, or something that is not six.

90.

She sent a photograph of the poster. Eleven cities. Her name is third and it is very small.

91.

Not the bright future.

GLOSSARY

Amu Nowruz a-MOO now-ROOZ — Persian, Uncle New Year. The figure who arrives at the spring equinox. In the story, Naneh Sarma waits for him all year, falls asleep, and misses him.

Behesht-e Zahra be-HESHT-e zah-RAA — Tehran's principal cemetery, in the far south of the city.

Dallal da-LAAL — Arabic via Persian, broker, middleman. A fixer who takes a percentage on any transaction.

Delgoshā del-go-SHAA — Persian, heart-opening. Cheering, delightful; used of gardens and views. Also a family name, and the title of Obeid Zakani's fourteenth-century collection of anecdotes.

Enghelab en-ghe-LAAB — Arabic via Persian, revolution. A major avenue in central Tehran, and the university district.

Halva hal-VAA — a dense saffron sweet made of flour, oil, sugar and rosewater, prepared specifically for mourning and distributed at funerals.

Javadiyeh ja-vaa-dee-YEH — a neighbourhood in the south of Tehran. Known among its own young men as Texas.

Javānmardi ja-vaan-mar-DEE — Persian, young-manliness. The old code of the street brotherhoods and the wrestling houses: generosity, courage, faithfulness to one's own, and turning a blind eye to another's faults.

Karaj ka-RAJ — a large city immediately west of Tehran.

Khanoom khaa-NOOM — Persian, lady, madam. A respectful form of address for a woman, used in place of a name.

Konkur kon-KOOR — from the French concours. The Iranian national university entrance examination.

Maddahi mad-daa-HEE — Arabic via Persian, eulogising. Devotional chanting recalling the events of Karbala, performed at religious gatherings including funerals.

Majles-e tarhim MAJ-les-e tar-HEEM — Arabic via Persian, assembly of mercy. The principal memorial gathering, usually held in the side hall of a mosque, comprising Quran recitation, a clergyman's address, maddahi, and a reception of tea, dates and halva.

Naneh Sarma naa-neh sar-MAA — Persian, Grandma Frost. A figure of folklore who waits each year for Amu Nowruz and falls asleep before he arrives.

Narmak nar-MAK — a district in the east of Tehran.

Nowruz now-ROOZ — Persian, new day. The Iranian new year, at the spring equinox.

Piroozi pee-roo-ZEE — Persian, victory. A long avenue and district in eastern Tehran.

Resāleh reh-saa-LEH — Arabic via Persian, treatise. A short prose work on a single subject.

Resāleh-ye Delgoshā reh-saa-LEH-ye del-go-SHAA — The Heart-Delighting Treatise. Obeid Zakani, mid-fourteenth century: short anecdotes satirising judges, preachers and the conspicuously pious. Extensively obscene, and bowdlerised in most editions printed since, the omissions marked with rows of dots.

Robāb ro-BAAB — a short-necked bowed or plucked string instrument of Persian and Central Asian music. Robabeh [ro-baa-BEH] is a woman's name formed from it.

Sabur sa-BOOR — Arabic via Persian, patient, enduring. The conventional first adjective in eulogies for women.

Sāderāt mamnū' saa-de-RAAT mam-NOO — Persian, export forbidden. Standard prohibition signage.

Semnan sem-NAAN — a city and province east of Tehran.

Shahr-e Rey shahr-e REY — an ancient city, now the southernmost district of Tehran.

Sharif sha-REEF — Sharif University of Technology, Tehran.

Zakāni, Obeid o-BAYD zaa-kaa-NEE — c. 1300-1371. Persian poet and satirist from Qazvin. Author of the *Resāleh-ye Delgoshā*, of *Akhlāq al-Ashrāf*, and of *Mush-o-Gorbeh*, in which a cat makes a public repentance and eats the mice who come to congratulate him.

For twenty-five years he could see the shape of a laugh before a room did, and never once feel it land. That was the whole of the gift, and it was also the whole of the deadness, and nobody ever told him they were the same faculty.

Then a woman of twenty-two said six words in a corridor, and he laughed, and it did not stop. He is better than he has ever been. He is also, for the first time, obliged to feel what he sells before he sells it, and there is a great deal in his own back catalogue he can no longer get through.

His broker of twenty-six years dies between one Tuesday and the next and leaves a folder of sixty-one refusals in his own hand. A man who will not give his name commissions a funeral speech and stipulates three things: no politics, her name must be said, and it must be funny.

Two hundred men laugh so hard at that funeral that not one of them, afterwards, can tell you what his face was doing.

A laugh and a grief use the same muscles. In a room where a man may not weep, there is exactly one way to arrange it.



CHEW Z
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