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THE TWELFTH MINUTE دقیقه دوازدهم

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C H E W Z

THE TWELFTH MINUTE

دقیقہ دوازدہم

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 79

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

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FROM THE DELGOSHĀ

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A NOTE ON THE PLATE

Siyāh-mashq means black practice.

A student of calligraphy is given a letter and told to write it. Not once — for months. The same letter, then the same word, over and over across a single sheet, at every angle, overlapping, upside down, until the page has taken as much ink as it can hold and has gone almost entirely black.

They were never meant to be looked at. They were exercises, made to be thrown away, and a great many of them were. The point was the hand, not the sheet.

Then somebody framed one.

They now hang in museums in Tehran and Istanbul and New York, and people stand in front of them for a long time, and what they are looking at is a page on which the same thing has been done so many times that no single instance of it can be found any more.

Nobody can read a siyāh-mashq. That is not a failure of the viewer.

There is nothing on it to read.

In many cases nobody knows whose hand made them, because a practice sheet does not get a signature.

The plate opposite is one page of black practice.



Practice sheet. Iron-gall ink on paper. Hand unknown.

THE STANDING OF THE CASE

The fifth 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.

WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE

Roshanak Azimi, twenty-six, from Javadiyeh in the south of Tehran. Came ninth in the national university entrance examination out of six hundred thousand. Graduated first in her year in engineering at Sharif. Ran an illegal parts business that kept four departments and a hospital working. Has lived in Stockholm for four years and performs in two languages. Keeps this notebook.

Manuchehr Delgoshā, called Manu, fifty-six, Tehran. Writes jokes that other people say. Has never performed, never had a byline, and is the most widely read unpublished writer in the Persian language. He appears here nine times, and the numbered entries are his.

Mahin, sixty-eight. Left Iran through Turkey in 1985 with two children and a sewing machine. Has run the Iranian hall in Hässelby, outside Stockholm, for thirty-one years, without a title or a salary.

Payam, Manu's younger brother. Absent. Arrested nine years ago and has not come home.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED

Nine years ago, in a basement in Tehran, Payam performed eleven words written by his brother, under his own name, and was filmed doing it. He was arrested. Nothing about the arrest has ever been

explained to the family.

Six years ago those eleven words came loose and stopped belonging to anybody. They appeared on a wall, in a caption under a photograph of a cat, and finally on state television in the mouth of a man in a good jacket who believed he had written them. Manu could not correct any of it, because correcting it would have required a claim.

Four years ago Roshanak, then twenty-two and about to graduate, could not write the speech she had been ordered to give, and hired him. He had never written more than forty words at a stretch. She spoke for twenty-nine minutes, said things that would have ended somebody else, and flew to a job in Holland on the Tuesday. Afterwards, in a corridor, she said six words and he laughed for the first time in eighteen years.

Two years ago his broker of twenty-six years died. Manu began giving his work away for nothing to rooms across Tehran, and a name with two halves in it was put on the material he and Roshanak were making together. Neither of them has ever told anybody who writes it.

Roshanak is now third on a poster.

This is the fifth day.

SYNOPSIS

Roshanak Azimi is twenty-six and has built something in Europe out of night buses, other people's floors, and a working knowledge of how festivals are structured to make performers pay for the privilege of appearing.

She is on a tour poster. She is third and her name is small.

She plays two rooms in Stockholm on the same night. At eight, fifty Swedes in English, who are attentive and generous and laugh in the wrong places and afterwards ask whether things are getting better. At ten, four hundred Iranians in a hall in Hässelby, in Persian, who heckle in three registers and know precisely when she is lying about home.

Neither audience knows the other exists, and the second one is where her real material lives, and nobody who books her can understand a word of it.

Then she brings over a comic who is not funny, and Europe falls in love with him, because Europe is not buying comedy.

Seventy-six entries, two of which are very long, in the shape of a working diary kept in the back of a notebook. A book about a woman who is extremely good at something in a market that would prefer her to be brave.

And about the twelve minutes she cannot reach on purpose.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Ask a performer about the thing that occasionally happens to them and watch how carefully they avoid answering.

They will call it a good night. They will say the room was with them. What they will not say, because it sounds either mystical or unwell, is what they actually mean: that somewhere in the middle of it they stopped being the one doing it, and that whatever took over was better than they are.

Musicians describe it most often, athletes describe it least accurately, and comedians hardly ever describe it at all, because a comedian who says *something else was running the set* has just told you their whole trade is not under their control.

Two details recur in every account and they are worth putting together.

The first is that it cannot be summoned. Everyone who has had it has tried, and trying is reliably the thing that prevents it.

The second is stranger. They frequently cannot remember it. Not the emotion of it — the content. They come off, elated, and cannot tell you what they said. There are recordings. The recordings are good. The person on them is unavailable for comment.

Which means the best work of a life can occur in a body whose owner was not present for it, and is not entitled to describe it afterwards, and has no way of getting back.

I do not think that is mystical. I think it is the plainest available account of what expertise turns into after enough years, and I think it is closer to what a calligrapher's hand does on the four hundredth repetition than to anything supernatural.

But I notice we have no ordinary word for it, in any language I read, and I notice that people who have had it lower their voices.

Chew Z

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I. TWO ROOMS

STOCKHOLM · Bryggan · 12 mars · 50 in · English

Fifty people, a low ceiling, and a very nice man called Anders who introduced me as *a voice from Iran*, which is a thing you get called instead of getting a laugh.

The set went fine. It went completely fine. Nobody was rude and nobody left and afterwards four people came and said something kind, and one of them said the word.

Brave.

That's the fourth time this month. There should be a scheme. You collect eleven of them and you get a small ceramic thing.

Here is what I have worked out and it took two years, so I'm putting it at the front. *from the Delgoshā*

They are not laughing at what I say. They are *being nice about* what I say, which sounds the same for about the first second and a half and is a completely different physical event. *They asked the physician why the medicine had not worked. He said, it worked. They said, but he is dead. He said, yes, and he is not in pain.*

A laugh is involuntary. That's the whole thing, that's the only thing, a laugh is your body grassing you up before you've decided anything.

What I'm getting is a decision. Fifty people deciding, at the same time, that they are on my side.

And you cannot build on that. You cannot escalate a decision. You can escalate a body.

Also they laugh in the wrong place.

Not randomly wrong. Consistently, predictably, structurally wrong, and always at the same *type* of line, which is the line where I mention that something is difficult.

I say a thing about a form with four lines on it. Nothing. I say a thing about a form with four lines on it *that took nine months*, and they go.

They're not laughing. They're going *oh no*, out loud, in a group, and it comes out through the same hole.

HÄSSELBY · Iranska Föreningen · 14 mars · 400 in · Persian

Four hundred.

Right, so, the difference. *from the Delgoshā*

Twelve minutes in a woman in the fourth row shouted the punchline of a bit before I got there not to ruin it to check — and when I did it differently she made a noise like a woman being handed the correct change.

At twenty minutes a man near the front told me my mother would be ashamed. At twenty-two he was crying laughing. At the interval he found me and gave me a bag of pistachios and told me again that my mother would be ashamed, warmly, like a compliment, which it was.

Nobody in that room told me I was brave. Four hundred Iranians and not one of them thinks anything I do is brave, because they know exactly how much it costs, which is nothing, because I am standing in a hall in Sweden.

That is the most restful thing that happens to me all month.

And they know when I'm lying.

You cannot do a bit about the electricity in front of four hundred people who left in 2011 and whose sister called them last Tuesday. They will let you get one sentence in and then the room goes quiet in a specific way that means *you haven't been back*.

I have been back. But I haven't been back in fourteen months and they can hear it.

The Swedes at eight can't hear anything. I could tell them anything. I could tell them the rials are made of bread.

Since I have described the method and not the act, here is the act.

This is the bit I open with in Persian and cannot do in English, and I am writing it out because in four years nobody has asked me what I actually say, they have only asked me whether it is difficult.

My parents were married for thirty-one years and I want to be clear that it was a successful marriage, by which I mean nobody died and the flat is still standing.

They were introduced. Properly introduced, the old way, with tea, and four relatives in the room whose entire function was to watch two nineteen-year-olds not look at each other.

And that system worked for a thousand years and I will tell you exactly why it worked. It worked because nobody involved had any expectations. Nobody was looking for a soulmate. They were looking for somebody who would not be a catastrophe, and the beautiful thing about that — the genuinely beautiful thing — is that it is an achievable target.

My generation has soulmates. My generation is on its knees.

You have a system where you meet nine hundred people and every one of them is a possible soulmate and therefore every one of them is a disappointment, and my mother had four relatives and a pot of tea and she got thirty-one years and a flat.

I am not saying the old way was better.

I am saying my mother is a homeowner. That is four hundred people gone and it is entirely safe and there is nothing in it anybody could object to, and it is the sixth version, and the first five were about the men.

The men version got a laugh and the room did not come with me. The moment I moved it onto the arithmetic they came.

The wedding-night material, which is the reason a woman in the third row has to be held up by her daughter every single time.

I am not writing all of it. Here is the frame.

I did four years of mechanical engineering. And there is a document called a fault report, and a fault report has a very specific structure, and I want to read you one.

Two components. Mismatched tolerances. One of them under continuous load and the other one under no load whatsoever and receiving all of the credit.

No maintenance schedule. No maintenance performed. The manual was provided at installation and there is no evidence that any party has opened it.

One party has been reporting the fault for nineteen years. The report has been received, acknowledged, and filed.

Root cause: at commissioning, both parties were nineteen and had received their technical training from a cousin.

Recommendation: the assembly cannot be repaired and must not be replaced, because it is load-bearing, and there are four children standing on it.

Nobody has ever complained about that bit. Not once, in nine years, in a hall with an average age of fifty-five.

A man of about seventy came up in Gothenburg and told me his wife had made him come and that he had been very worried about what I was going to say and that he wished somebody had said it in 1974.

Mahin runs that hall. Sixty-eight. Came out through Turkey in 1985 with two kids and a sewing machine. Thirty-one years of that room and she has no title and no salary and she sells the tickets herself out of a tin that used to have biscuits in it and still smells of them.

She sits at the back with her arms folded and she does not laugh. Not once. Not in nine visits.

Afterwards she tells me what was wrong. In Persian. In front of people. At length.

Last night it was: **the second one was ninety seconds too long and you knew it at sixty and you kept going because you liked it.**

Which was true, and which nobody else in Europe has said to me in four years, including three professionals who are paid to.

She asked if I'd eaten.

I said yes.

She said no you haven't.

STOCKHOLM · Bryggan · 19 mars · 44 in · English

Forty-four.

A man in a very good coat waited afterwards to tell me the set was important.

I said thank you.

He said: it must be very difficult, doing this.

And I said — and I want to write down exactly what I said because I have thought about it since — I said: it's not, it's the easiest job I've ever had, the last one involved bearings.

And he laughed. Properly. First real laugh of the night and it came from a man in a coat in a corridor after I'd stopped working.

That is the whole industry in one exchange and I'm not over it.

On the actual mechanics of what I do, since this notebook is mine and nobody reads it. I don't do the thing where you take a

line and file it down until it's a razor. I know a man who does that and he's the best on earth at it and I have watched him take eleven words out of a sentence and improve it, and I find it obscene, like watching someone perform surgery on a joke while it's awake.

I go the other way.

I pile. I put one specific thing on top of another specific thing and I keep going past the point where a professional would stop, and I add the fourth one and the fifth one and the seventh one, and somewhere around there the room stops being able to hold it and something gives.

It's not a punchline. It's a load test.

He builds a device. I build a heap and then I stand on it.

And I laugh.

I laugh at my own stuff constantly, mid-sentence, which everybody in this industry says is a fault and which I have decided is a feature, because when I go, forty people go with me, and you cannot fake that and nobody has ever been offended by it.

He has not laughed in twenty years.

I have thought about that a lot and I have never once said it to him.

HÄSSELBY · 21 mars · Nowruz · 400 in · Persian

Nowruz show. Four hundred, half of them under twelve, all of them sugared.

Did the bit about the haft-sin, which only works in that room and will never work anywhere else on earth: seven items beginning with the same letter, and one of them is a *fish*, and the fish is the only living thing on the table, and every year that fish looks at the garlic and understands its situation.

Then the bit about my aunt's marriage, which I am not writing down because if this notebook is ever read by a person from my family I will have to leave the continent.

Mahin at the back, arms folded, nothing. Afterwards: **the fish is good, the aunt is lazy, you're doing your grandmother's voice and she was funnier than that.**

She never met my grandmother.

She's right.

The thing I am not writing about.

Fourteen months.

from the Delgoshā

The thief was asked how he entered the locked room. He said, I did not enter, I was already in it, and had been for some hours, and had eaten.

Right. Since nobody reads this.

There is a thing that happens to me on stage and it has happened perhaps forty times in nine years and I have told two people about it.

Twelve minutes in. Never the first ten, never after twenty. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

I stop being the one doing it.

Not a blackout. I am completely there, I can see the room, I know where I am. But the part of me that decides what comes next goes off duty, and something else picks it up, and **that thing is better than me.**

It calls back to things I have forgotten saying. It holds a silence for four seconds that I would never have the nerve to hold. It takes a bit apart in the middle and rebuilds it going somewhere I have never gone and did not know was there.

And when it stops I am about eleven minutes further on and I do not know what I said.

Not *hazily*. At all. There is nothing there. I have recordings of eleven minutes of my own voice doing the best work of my life and I listen to them like a person listening to a stranger, and I cannot reproduce a single line, because I do not know how any of it got there.

The rules, which I have mapped and cannot control.

It needs a real room and it needs a fresh audience.

It has never happened with a camera in the room. Not once. Not even a phone on a table.

It has never happened in English.

It has never happened in Sweden.

The last time was fourteen months ago, in a basement in Tehran, forty people, on a Wednesday, and I came off and I was shaking and I had no idea why.

So the situation is: I am being flown around Europe. I am on a poster. There is a man whose job is my calendar.

And the only thing I have ever done that I actually rate happened in a room with eleven plastic chairs and no ventilation, in a language nobody paying me can understand, and I cannot get back to it, and I have stopped being able to tell whether that is because of the rooms or because of me.

MALMÖ · Inkonst · 3 april · 90 in · English

Ninety. Good room, good light, sound guy who cared.

Eleven minutes in I felt the front edge of it — there is a front edge, it's like the second before a sneeze — and then a girl in the second row lifted a phone.

Gone. Instantly. Like a switch.

I did another twenty-five minutes and they were good minutes and I was the entire time the person doing them.

GOTHENBURG · night bus · 4 april

Six hours, forty euros cheaper than the flight, seat that doesn't go back.

There's a specific class of European who finds out you take the bus and gets visibly excited about it, because it fits.

On sex, since I do about eleven minutes of it a night and someone will eventually ask me to justify it.

I am not being provocative. Provocative is for people who think the subject is embarrassing.

I have written a fault report on a rotor assembly and I have written one on a gearbox that failed at eleven thousand hours. And the thing nobody tells you is that a fault report and a description of a marriage are the same document: two components, mismatched tolerances, one of them under continuous load, nobody read the manual, nobody has serviced it since installation, and it is going to fail in a way that was entirely predictable eleven years ago. That's the whole act. I describe bodies the way I describe bearings, in exactly that register, with exactly that vocabulary, and it is filthy solely because I refuse to be delicate about it.

Delicacy is what makes it dirty. Precision makes it engineering.

Also nobody has ever complained.

Four hundred Iranians in a community hall in Hässelby, average age fifty-five, and I do eleven minutes about what actually happens on a wedding night and there is a woman in the third row every single time laughing so hard she has to be held up by her daughter.

The Swedes at eight are fine with it and slightly disappointed, because they were braced for it to be political.

COPENHAGEN · Huset · 11 april · 120 in · English

Best English room I've had. Actual laughs, several times, in the correct places.

Fourteen minutes in, nothing. Not even the front edge.

The inversion bit, which is the one I am proudest of and which works in both rooms and which is the whole of my technique in nine minutes.

First half. I am an Iranian explaining Swedes.

They queue. They queue for everything. There is a machine and you take a ticket and the ticket has a number and the number is your position in a moral hierarchy.

I have watched a Swedish man take a ticket in an empty room.

He was the only person there. He took a ticket. Because the alternative was to walk to the counter and simply be served, like an animal.

They apologise when you stand on them. That is not a joke, that is a documented behaviour. I stood on a woman's foot in Slussen and she said sorry, and I said sorry, and she said no no, and I have thought about that woman for two years and I hope she is well.

And the silence. A Swede can sit with you in a silence for forty minutes and be having a wonderful time. An Iranian in a forty-minute silence has concluded that you are dying and has begun telephoning relatives.

Second half. I am a Swede explaining Iranians.

They arrive. They are late. They are late in a way that is not carelessness, it is a form of respect — arriving on time suggests you had nothing else to do, which suggests nobody wants you.

Everything is offered three times and refused three times and this is not politeness, it is a load test, and the third offer is the real one, and if you accept on the first offer they will give it to you and they will never fully recover.

They will feed you when you are not hungry. They will feed you when you have just eaten. If you tell an Iranian woman you have eaten she hears it as an opening position.

And they are all somehow related to a general.

The second half gets the bigger laugh in both rooms. Both. Every time. And I know exactly why: because I have been watching Swedes for four years with the attention of somebody whose visa depends on it, and they have been watching me with the attention of somebody being polite.

Nobody has been insulted in nine years and nobody has had to do anything about it afterwards, which is the design.

Religion, which I do for about six minutes and which has never once got me in trouble anywhere.

I do not touch what anybody believes. Not because I am frightened — because it is boring. Nobody's belief is funny. Belief is the least funny material available and every comedian who goes near it thinks they are the first.

I go after the **administration**.

Every religion on earth has a building, and every building has chairs, and the chairs tell you everything.

Who sits. Who stands. Which room has the chairs with the backs on them. Who has to be helped to a chair and by whom and how long it takes and whether anybody notices that it took a long time. I have been to funerals in three countries and I can tell you the entire theology of a place in forty seconds if you show me the seating.

And there is always a man. There is always exactly one man whose job is the chairs, and he is not paid, and he has been doing it for

thirty years, and he is the only person in that building who has ever actually helped anybody, and he will not be mentioned in the service.

Mahin on that bit, in front of eleven people, in the corridor:
the chairs are correct and you have never carried one.

She is the man with the chairs. She has been the man with the chairs for thirty-one years.

I put her in the bit the following month, without naming her, and she noticed inside four seconds and said nothing for a fortnight and then said: better.

On lagom, which is the reason the eight o'clock room cannot laugh at me.

Lagom is the national value and it does not translate. The nearest is *just the right amount*, and it is not a compromise and it is not moderation as a fallback — it is moderation as an **achievement**. A Swede who has had exactly enough of something has done it correctly. There is a right quantity of everything and a good person finds it.

I want you to hold that next to my act.

My entire method is going past the point where a reasonable person would stop. I put one thing on top of another thing and I keep going after it is enough, and after it is too much, and the laugh is the sound of a room that could not carry the seventh item.

Lagom is a rule against the seventh item.

So at eight o'clock I stand in front of fifty people whose culture has taught them, correctly and kindly, that there is a right amount — and I do a bit that only works if you exceed it — and they follow me to the fourth item with real generosity and at the fifth they begin to feel that somebody ought to say something. It is not that they do not get it. **They get it and they think it is unnecessary**, which is worse and which is also a completely defensible position.

And then there is Jante.

Jantelagen. Ten rules, from a novel, which everybody here will tell you nobody believes in and which everybody here has absolutely

soaked in. You shall not think you are anything special. You shall not think you are better than us. You shall not think you can teach us anything.

I stand on a raised platform in front of strangers and talk about myself for fifty minutes for money.

My profession is illegal here in a way that no law covers.

That is why *brave* is the compliment. Brave is the only permitted way to be exceptional in this country — it converts standing up into something that happened *to* you, which is modest, which is allowed. Funny is a claim. Brave is a circumstance.

They have found the one word that lets them applaud me without breaking Jante and they did not have to think about it and none of them know they are doing it.

Four more, quickly, because they are all the same joke.

The personal number. Ten digits and you do not exist without one. No number, no bank, no phone, no flat, no doctor. I spent five years in Tehran defeating a system that did not work and I arrived in a country with a system that works perfectly, and there is no corner of it, and no cousin, and nobody to ask, and I have never felt so completely and comprehensively handled in my life.

The state off-licence. You may buy alcohol from one shop, owned by the government, which closes at three on Saturday and does not open on Sunday. Every Swede knows the closing time the way we know the exchange rate. I have watched a fifty-year-old man run.

Fika. A statutory coffee break. Not a habit — an institution, and if you keep working through it people become concerned about you.

Death cleaning. *Döstädning*. You spend your last years throwing things away so that your children do not have to. There are books about it. It is considered a kindness.

I told my mother about it on the telephone.

She was silent for a while and then said: what would I throw away?

And I said, you know — things. Things you do not need.

And she said: **I have four freezers.**

On race, since I do that too.

I never do a bit *about* anybody. That's the cheap version and it dies in the room within a year because contempt has no second act.

What I do is put it on. I take whatever the ridiculous position is and I climb inside it and I defend it, sincerely, at length, with reasons, until it falls over by itself.

So I'll do four minutes as an Iranian explaining the Swedes — the queueing, the shoes, the way they say sorry when *you* stand on *them*, the national horror of a conversation with no agenda.

Then four minutes as a Swede explaining Iranians, and **the second one is funnier, because I do it better**, because I have been listening to it for four years and they have not.

The Swedish room laughs harder at the second. The Iranian room laughs harder at the second.

That's how I know it works. Both rooms laugh at themselves being described accurately by somebody who has clearly been paying attention, and nobody is being insulted, and nobody has to do anything about it afterwards.

Religion I do the same way. I never touch what anybody believes. I go after the *administration*. The seating. The furniture. The catering. The bloke.

There is no theology in the world that will survive somebody describing its chairs.

42.

She sent me nine minutes of a room in Hässelby, recorded on a telephone from the back, and I have listened to it four times. The construction is nothing like mine.

She does not compress. She has no interest in compressing. She lays one specific object next to another specific object and then a third and a fourth, past the point at which any professional would have closed it, and around the sixth the room stops being able to carry it.

I have spent twenty-seven years taking things out. I would have cut her fourth item and her fifth and I would have been wrong, and I know I would have been wrong because I can hear four hundred people on a telephone recording not being able to breathe.

43.

I have never in my life built a laugh out of accumulation and I am fifty-six.

44.

I telephoned and told her the fourth one was the load-bearing one and she said yes obviously and asked if that was all I wanted.

from the Delgoshā

*They asked the acrobat how he had learned. He
said, by falling. They asked how many times. He
said, I have not finished.*

II. THE CIRCUIT

On how European festivals actually work, which nobody tells you and which I worked out in one season.

You are invited. That's the word they use. *Invited*.

You get a fee. The fee is real. Then you find out the fee does not include the flight, or the accommodation, or the visa fee, or the visa appointment which is in a different country, or the four days you now cannot work because you are at a festival.

So the invitation costs you money. You pay to be invited. And everybody knows this and nobody says it, because saying it out loud makes you sound like somebody who cannot afford to be there, which you are.

The arbitrage is that the numbers only fail one at a time.

from the Delgoshā
One festival is a loss. Four festivals in eleven days, in a line, on buses, with one visa, staying with the people, is a profit – and there is nobody whose job it is to hate that, because the people who run festivals do not talk well and thank the people who perform at them are not, as a rule, engineers.

I did it on a sheet of paper on a night bus outside Malmö.

On the name, since I have been asked and since he has certainly written down his own version.

He will have told you he suggested it. He believes that. I have let him believe it for two years because it costs nothing and because he needed it more than I did.

Here is what happened.

I was in Utrecht in a station at eleven at night arguing with him about what to call the thing, and my hands were full, so I was doing voice notes. And I could not decide whether to say my half first or his half first, so I said both, badly, in one breath, running them together while walking —

Ro— Manu— Roshanak-Manu, no, Manu-Roshanak, no—

— and the telephone, which transcribes voice notes for people who cannot listen to them, rendered the whole of that as one word.

ROMANU.

I looked at the screen on a platform in Utrecht and laughed at a machine for about forty seconds and then sent him the screenshot with no message.

He rang me eleven minutes later and said: that is the name.

And I said yes.

So neither of us named it.

A transcription engine named it, out of a woman failing to pronounce two names at once, in a railway station, and we have built four years on that and there is nobody to credit and there is no origin story and we have never told anybody, and every festival programme in Europe has been guessing for two years.

It is the most appropriate thing that has ever happened to either of us and we have never once discussed it.

Then I started doing it for other people.

Not planned. Somebody asked. I did his and it worked and then he told somebody.

There are now eleven of us on a list. **What I actually do:** invitations, because a festival will invite anybody if you make it easy for them and the person asking has been at their festival · visas, which is a specific skill and which I am extremely good at because I did four years of paperwork for a smuggling operation · routing, which is the bus timetables and the arbitrage · and beds, which is the whole thing, which is the entire business, because the only reason any of it works is that eleven people are sleeping on each other's floors.

What I take.

Almost nothing. Enough to cover the calls.

Somebody asked me why and I said what I said to Manu four years ago, which is that if I take proper money off them they stop being able to afford it and then I have solved nothing.

He said that's not a business, that's a favour.

I said correct.

HELSINKI · 22 april · 60 in · English · then a flat, 25 in, Persian, 2am

The second one was not a gig. Somebody's flat, twenty-five people, no stage, a chair.

Fifteen minutes in I felt the front edge for the second time this year.

Then a man's phone rang and it was his mother and he took it.

Right, so, the phones.

I am going to write this down calmly.

It has never once happened with a camera in the room. Not a professional camera, not a phone on a table, not a phone in a pocket that somebody might pick up. Nothing. Forty-odd times in nine years and every single one of them in a room where nobody could record me.

Which is a problem, because the entire industry I am now in exists to put me in rooms with cameras.

The tour is filmed.

STOCKHOLM · Bryggan · 2 maj · 55 in · English

Fifty-five. Fine. Brave x2.

HÄSSELBY · 5 maj · 400 in · Persian

Four hundred.

Nine minutes in there was a heckle from the middle — a man doing the *my daughter is your age* thing — and I took him apart for about ninety seconds and it was the best I have been in Sweden and it was still just me doing it.

Mahin afterwards: **you enjoyed that too much and the room could tell. He gave you a gift and you spent it on yourself.**

I was going to argue.

I did not argue.

She was right, obviously. She is always right, and she is right in the specific way that is impossible to be angry about, which is that she does not tell you what to do, she tells you what happened.

MALMÖ · 9 maj · 90 in GOTHENBURG · 10 maj · 70 in OSLO · 12 maj · 110 in

Three in four days, one bus route, one visa. Eleven of us moved through Oslo that week off one invitation.

Nothing.

On the two rooms, which I have now been doing for two years and which is the actual subject of my life.

At eight I am a voice from Iran.

At ten I am a woman from Javadiyeh whose aunt is a disgrace.

The eight o'clock room is where the money is, the poster is, the tour is, the man whose job is my calendar is. It is entirely in English. It is my second-best forty minutes and everybody who is paying me thinks it is my act.

The ten o'clock room is where the work is. **Nobody who books me can understand a single word of the ten o'clock room.** Not one. My agent has been to Hässelby twice and sat at the back and afterwards said it seemed to go well, which is what a person says about weather in a country they are visiting.

I could tell them.

I have thought about how. There is no version of that conversation that does not end with somebody suggesting I do the Persian material in English, which cannot be done, not because of translation but because the ten o'clock room has forty years of shared information in it and the eight o'clock room has a Wikipedia page.

from the Delgoshā

A man sold the same rug in two markets, and in the first they praised the colour and in the second the knot, and he came home rich and could not tell his wife what he had been selling.

45.

She telephoned about a visa problem in Norway and we talked for eleven minutes about the visa and forty about a heckler.

I gave her three notes and two of them were wrong.

46.

I have been wrong about her material four times now, in specific technical ways, and each time the error is the same error: **I keep trying to close it.**

She does not close. She loads.

Twenty-seven years is a long time to only know one way of doing a thing.

COPENHAGEN · 18 maj · 130 in

Sold out. Third on a four-name bill and my name on the poster is smaller than the venue's.

Backstage there is a boy from the festival with a laminate whose entire job is to walk people eleven metres.

GOTHENBURG · Folkteatern · 26 juni · 140 in · English

A hundred and forty and a good room and I want to record what happened at minute nine because it is the whole two years.

I did the queue bit. The Swedish man taking a ticket in an empty room.

They loved it. Properly loved it, laughed for eleven seconds, best response I have had in English all year.

And then a woman in the fourth row put her hand up.

She put her hand up. In a comedy club. At quarter past nine at night. And when I looked at her she said, apologetically, that it was because of the fire regulations.

And that was funnier than anything I said in fifty minutes and she was not joking and she will never know. On my mother, who does not know what I do.

She knows I am in Sweden. She knows there is a poster. She has been sent the poster by four separate people and has sent it on to eleven more, which is how the diaspora functions and why no Iranian has ever successfully kept a secret.

She does not know what is in the act.

She has never asked, and I have worked out why, and it is not squeamishness. **She has decided not to know**, deliberately, the way she decided not to know about the parts for five years, and it is the single most sophisticated act of love anybody has ever performed on me.

Because if she asked, I would tell her. And then she would know. And then she would have to have a position.

So she asks whether I have eaten.

They all ask whether I have eaten. That is what the women in my life do instead of asking the actual question, and I have started doing it too, and I caught myself doing it to Farhad in a kitchen in Berlin at one in the morning and I put the notes down and asked him if he was eating properly and he said not really and I made him a plate.

OSLO · 30 juni · 110 in · English

Nothing.

STOCKHOLM · Bryggan · 1 juli · 48 in · English

Nothing. Brave x1.

On the two-year thing, plainly, since I have been circling it.

I am extremely good at this.

I want that in my own handwriting because there is nobody I can say it to. I am not being arrogant, I am being accurate, in the way you are accurate about a load calculation. **I am one of the four or five best people currently doing this in Persian anywhere on earth**, and I know that because I have watched the others and because Mahin has watched all of us for thirty-one years and would say so if it were not true, and because four hundred people in a hall in Hässelby do not give anything away.

And the market that pays me cannot detect it.

Not *disagrees with it*. Cannot detect it. There is no instrument. They are measuring something else with an instrument built for something else and getting a reading, and the reading is *brave*.

And I could go home.

I want to write that down too. I have thought about it four times this year, seriously, with a calculator.

I could go home and play basements and be the best in the room every night and be arrested inside eighteen months, and the second half of that sentence is the reason I am in Sweden, and I am not going to pretend otherwise in my own notebook.

Farhad cannot go home either, and he has never once mentioned it on a stage, and I do it for laughs.

That is the thing I am not going to write about again.

And then I brought Farhad over.

III. THE GOOD STORY

Farhad is forty-one and he was a structural engineer in Ahvaz and he has been in Berlin for two years and he is not funny.

I want to be careful here because I am going to spend a long time on this and I do not want it to read as cruelty, because I like him, and because by the end of this notebook he will have something I want.

He is not unfunny in the way a beginner is unfunny. Beginners are unfunny because they are frightened and because they haven't found the thing yet, and you can hear the thing in them, underneath, waiting.

There is nothing underneath.

He is warm and thoughtful and he has been through something enormous and he has an extraordinary story and he tells it clearly and well, and at no point in fifty minutes does anybody's body do anything. *from the Delaoshā*
Two men came before the qazi, one who had suffered greatly and one who was in the right. He

I knew in four minutes *and for the first, and was praised for his mercy,*

and the second went home.
Four minutes into the first tape he sent me: 'I sat on the floor of my flat and I knew, and I felt sick, and then I got him three festivals.

Because what was I going to say. *I have listened to your tape and I have determined that you are unfunny at a structural level.* Who am I. I did four years of engineering and I have a man in Tehran in the back of my head with a stopwatch and I did not ask for him either.

And then Europe fell in love with him.

BERLIN · 2 juni · Farhad's first · 200 in

Two hundred people. Standing ovation.

I stood at the back and I watched two hundred Europeans give a standing ovation to fifty minutes of material that got, by my count, eleven laughs, four of which were the *oh no* laugh, which is not a laugh, which is a group deciding something.

They loved him. They were not lying and they were not being polite. They loved him.

He is a wonderful story and he tells it straight and he does not protect himself and there is not one joke in it that would survive being written down.

And here is the thing I have been avoiding for two years, which I now have to write in my own notebook in my own hand.

They are not buying comedy.

They never were. They are buying testimony, and testimony is better if it is not funny, because funny is suspicious, funny suggests you are all right, funny suggests you might be enjoying yourself and that you might have been enjoying yourself *there* too.

I have spent two years trying to be funnier in that room and every single increment has made me less useful to it.

Farhad gives them what the room came for and I keep giving them what I came with.

He asked me for notes.

Of course he did. He is a lovely man and I am the one who got him here and he asked me for notes in a kitchen in Berlin at one in the morning with genuine humility and I gave him eleven pages.

Structure. Where to put the turn. Why the third thing has to be shorter than the second. How to hold. The load-bearing item. All of it, everything I know, everything I got off a man in Tehran over four years, handed over free at one in the morning to a man who had asked nicely.

He read all eleven pages. He thanked me properly. He asked good questions.

He cannot use any of it.

Not won't. Cannot. It is like handing somebody the specification for a bridge who does not have the material. He understands the argument perfectly and there is nothing in him for it to be an argument about.

And he keeps getting better at being what they want.

Which is: slower. He has learned to slow down, and the slower he goes the more they lean in, and he has correctly identified that his best asset is the pause before he says something true, and he has started building the pauses.

He is becoming extremely good at a thing that is not comedy and that has no name and that fills two hundred seats.

AMSTERDAM · 14 juni · me, 100 in · him, 300 in, same festival, bigger room

Yes. Fine. Noted.

On the specific feeling, which I am going to describe once and then not mention again.

It is not jealousy. I have been jealous and it is hot and it is about the person and you want to take something off them.

This is cold and it is not about him at all.

It is the feeling of finding out, at twenty-six, after four years of night buses, that you have been extremely good at the wrong thing in the wrong market and that the market was never going to want the thing you are good at, and that the person who is going to succeed at it is somebody you personally brought over on a visa you personally filled in.

And I would do the visa again. That is the part that has annoyed me for a month. I have run it and I would do it again, and not out of nobility. Because if I take proper money off them they stop being able to afford it and then I have solved nothing, and because the eleven of us on that list are the only reason any of this works, and

because Farhad on a floor in Berlin with no invitation is not better for anybody.

The code does not have a clause for *unless he becomes more successful than you*.

I have looked.

HÄSSELBY · 21 juni · 400 in · Persian

Did fifty-five minutes and it was the best I have been all year and Mahin said **yes, that was almost you**, which from her is a parade.

Then she said: the Berlin one is coming here in the autumn, isn't he.

I said who told you.

She said: I run this hall. *from the Delgoshā*

Then she said: Is he funny? *The blind man was praised for his patience, the*

lame man for his courage, and the man who was
And I said *no* *neither was praised for nothing at all, and lived a*

And she said: good. They'll be kind to him. They're always kind to the ones who aren't. *long time*

And then she said the thing that has kept me up for a week.

She said: they're never kind to you. Have you noticed?

I said no.

She said: they're not. They've never once been kind to you. Four hundred people in that room and not one of them has ever let you off anything.

She said: that's the compliment. Nobody's told you, so I'm telling you.

47.

She telephoned about Farhad and talked for fifty minutes and did not once say the thing she was calling about.

She described the room. The seats, the lighting rig, where the bar was, how long the applause went on and what shape it was.

She has never done that before. She is a person who says the thing.

I recognised it because I have written it down four times in four books, and because my mother does it, and because a man in a university did it to me two years ago and I did not understand until afterwards that it was the answer.

I did not tell her she was doing it.

48.

Then she asked whether I had ever been beaten by somebody worse than me.

I said constantly. I said three men on television have been doing my material for twenty-five years and two of them are not good and one of them is actively bad and all three are wealthy.

She said that's not the same and she is right, because they were saying my words, and Farhad is not saying hers, and nobody has taken anything off her.

She has been beaten by a man doing his own worse thing better than she does her better thing. There is no name for that and I have looked for one for a fortnight, for her, and I have not found it, and I have written four hundred thousand jokes.

IV. THE INTRODUCTION

They asked me to introduce him.

The festival. Two thousand seats, the big room, the one with the balcony. Ten minutes at the top, then Farhad for an hour.

The woman who asked me did it in an email of four lines and one of them was *we thought it would be lovely coming from you.*

from the Delgoshā

They asked the herald whether he believed the proclamation. He said, that is not the office. They asked what the office was. He said, to be heard at the back.

I said yes in about six seconds and then sat on the floor.

Because think about what that actually is.

I have to stand in front of two thousand people and sell a man I know is not funny, to a room that is going to love him for exactly the reasons I find unbearable, **and I am not permitted to lie and I am not permitted to sabotage him.**

Lying is out because they will find out inside four minutes when he starts, and because he will know, and because I would know.

Sabotage is out because he is a lovely man who asked me for notes at one in the morning and read all eleven pages.

And doing it flatly is also out, because a flat introduction from the person who brought him over is the loudest possible statement and everybody in that building would hear it.

So I had to do the thing Manu does.

Write for somebody else's mouth. Write something true that serves a person other than yourself and put your own name on it and stand in front of two thousand people and mean it.

He has done it for twenty-seven years and I have never once done it and I have four days.

I telephoned him.

I said I need to know how you do it.

He said: how I do what.

I said: how you write something you don't agree with.

There was a pause of about four seconds, which for him is a lecture, and then he said:

You are not writing something you don't agree with. You are looking for the part you do agree with, and it is always there, and it is usually smaller than you want it to be, and you build the whole thing on that and you do not mention any of the rest.

Then he said: what don't you agree with?

And I said he's not funny. And he said: is that the whole of it?

And it wasn't. Obviously it wasn't.

Four days on the floor of a flat in Stockholm and here is what I found, and it took four days because it was under everything else:

He is doing the harder thing.

He stands up in front of two hundred people and tells them what happened to him, straight, with no protection, and takes nothing off the top for himself. No joke, no armour, no exit.

I have never done that. Not once, not in nine years. Every single thing I have ever said on a stage about my mother, about Javadiyeh, about the parts, about the water in that flat — every one of them has a joke on the end of it, and the joke is a door, and I built every one of those doors before I opened my mouth so that I could leave.

He does not build doors.

That is not a lesser skill. **It is a thing I am not brave enough to do**, and I have been calling him unfunny for two months because unfunny is easier to say than *he is doing the frightening one*.

So that's the eight percent I agree with, and the whole introduction is built on it, and I never mention the rest.

AMSTERDAM · Grote Zaal · 4 juli · 2000 in · English

Good

evening.

My name is Roshanak Azimi, I am third on a poster somewhere in this building, and I am about to spend nine minutes on a man who does not need me.

I want to start by explaining what I am, because it will help you.

I am a comedian. Which means my entire professional life consists of standing in front of people like you and saying true things with a joke on the end.

I want you to notice that phrase. **With a joke on the end.** The joke is not the point. The joke is the exit. It is a door I build at the end of a true sentence so that when the sentence lands and the room goes quiet I have somewhere to go.

Every comedian you have ever seen has done this. Every single one. We are not brave. We are extremely fast, and we are running.

I have been building those doors for nine years and I am very good at it. I can build one in four words. I have built them at funerals. I have built one, once, at a hospital bed, and it worked, and I have thought about it since.

Now.

Two years ago a man sent me a tape from a flat in Berlin. Farhad Sahebi. Forty-one. Structural engineer, twenty-two years, Ahvaz.

He builds bridges. Or he did, and then he did not, and there is a period of about eleven months in the middle of that sentence which is his to describe and not mine.

I watched the tape.

And I want to be honest with you about my first reaction, because everything I am going to say after this depends on you believing me.

My first reaction was professional and it was **contempt**.

Because I watched fifty minutes and I counted eleven laughs, and I sat on the floor of my flat and I thought: this man has no doors.

He goes to the end of the sentence and he stops. And the room goes quiet. And he stays in it.

I have spent two years being extremely rude about that in private, and about four days being honest about it, and what I have arrived at is this.

He is not failing to build the door.

He is refusing. I want to explain what that costs, because you will not be able to see it from where you are sitting.

When you say a true thing to two hundred people and do not follow it with a joke, there are between four and nine seconds in which you are standing in front of them with

nothing. No protection. No exit. Nothing between you and them.

I have never survived nine seconds of that in my life. My record is about two and a half, and at two and a half I panic and I reach for the door, every single time, and I have been telling myself for nine years that this is *timing*.

It is not timing. It is fear, and it is very well disguised, and it has made me a great deal of money.

Farhad does forty of those a night.

So here is my introduction, and it has taken me four days and one telephone call to a man in Tehran who I am not going to name.

I am the funnier one.

I want that stated plainly because I have been going mad about it for two months and because it is true and because false modesty is a door as well.

I am funnier than him. I am funnier than most of the people on this bill. I have been ninth out of six hundred thousand at one thing and I intend to be first at this one.

And in about nine minutes a man is going to walk out here and do something in front of you that I cannot do and have never been able to do and have spent nine years constructing an entire technique to avoid.

You are going to want to give him a standing ovation.

I am asking you not to.

Not because he doesn't deserve one — because a standing ovation is also a door. It is the room's door. It is what you build at the end of nine seconds you could not sit inside, so that you have somewhere to go.

He will not build one for you. Please do not build one for yourselves.

Sit in it. Sit all the way through the quiet bit. It is four to nine seconds and it will not injure you and it is the entire reason he came.

One more thing and then I will go.

Farhad has asked me for notes twice. Both times I gave him everything I know — structure, the turn, the third thing, why it has to be shorter — eleven pages, at one in the morning, in a kitchen, for nothing.

He has used none of it.

And I said to somebody last month, bitterly, that he *couldn't* use it.

That was wrong and I want to correct it in public because I said *from the Delgoshda* it in private.

He read all eleven pages and he understood every word and *The crowd wept at the play and went home comforted, and the actor went home and could not* he decided against it, and he was right, and I have been the one *think why he was hungry* who couldn't hear it.

Ladies and gentlemen — no doors.

Farhad

Sahebi.

He got the standing ovation.

Obviously he did. Two thousand people, on their feet, at about the fifty-minute mark, exactly as I told them not to.

I stood in the wings and I felt it. All of it. Two thousand bodies going at once and none of them mine and I have never in my life felt anything like it and I do not have a word for what it was, and it was not envy, and it was not pride, and it was somewhere between being winded and hearing your own name.

And afterwards a man in a very good coat found me in the corridor and told me that the introduction was the best thing he had seen all festival.

He did not say brave.

from the Delgoshā

*The pupil asked which was the greater art, to speak
or to be silent. The master was silent. The pupil,
who was young, wrote this down as an answer, and
it was not one.*

V. HAVE YOU EATEN

HÄSSELBY · 12 september · Mahin's kitchen · 2 people · Persian

I went to give her the autumn dates and she put me in a chair and started cooking and did not stop for two hours and did not once look up, and what follows is as much of it as I could get down afterwards, and it is not all of it, and there was a section about her second husband that I am not writing in a book.

She was making ghormeh sabzi. She makes it for the hall, in a pot the size of a bath, and she chops the herbs by hand because the machine bruises them, which she said, and then said again forty minutes later as though she had not.

She did not ask about the festival.

She asked whether I had eaten. I said yes. She said no you haven't, and put a plate down beside me that I had not asked for and did not want and finished entirely.

Then she said: so, Amsterdam.

I said: two thousand.

She said: hm.

And then chopped for about a minute and a half.

Then, without any change of tone at all, and while separating parsley:

She said her first husband had been a beautiful man and completely useless, and that she had known this on the second night, and that the second night is when you find out because the first night everybody is trying.

She said the thing nobody tells girls is that a man who is confident in a room is very often confident because he has never once been told, and that being told is a service, and that she had performed this service for four men and none of them had thanked her.

Then she described, in detail, over about ninety seconds, exactly what she had told the first one, using vocabulary I did not know she possessed, in a kitchen, at sixty-eight, holding a knife, without stopping chopping.

I made a noise. She said: what.

She said the problem with my generation is that we think being explicit is being brave.

She said: you say those words on a stage and you think it is a transgression. It is not a transgression, it is a *description*, and your grandmothers used worse in the bath house and nobody paid them.

Then she said the word. The really bad one. Casually, in the middle of a sentence, as punctuation, while reaching for the salt, and then went on with what she was saying about her sister's marriage, and I sat there like a girl of eleven.

On religion, while soaking beans:

She said she had been at a rowzeh in 1979 where a man had wept for forty minutes about Karbala and then eaten more of the halva than any other person in the building, and that she had counted, and that she had been fourteen.

She said she has nothing whatever against God and a great deal against the seating.

Then she said: I have been in that hall thirty-one years and every man who has ever come to me about the chairs has been a man who does not carry chairs.

On Sweden:

She said the Swedes are the kindest people she has ever lived among and that in thirty-nine years not one of them has ever asked her a second question.

She said: they ask you one. They ask it beautifully. They listen to the whole answer. And then that is the end of it, for ever, and you go home.

She said she has three Swedish friends of thirty years and she does not know how any of their mothers died.

On her own body, while the pot came up:

Ten minutes. I am not writing it down. Not because it was obscene — although it was, catastrophically — but because about four minutes in I understood that she was doing it to make me laugh, and that she had been doing it for two hours, and that at no point

had she raised her voice or performed a single line, and that she had **corpsed exactly once**, at the end, at her own thing, and had immediately covered it by asking whether the rice was on.

I have made my living for nine years doing what that woman did in a kitchen without an audience.

from the Delgoshā

*..... said, And
the were not told, and were the
better for it.*

Then she wiped her hands and sat down, which she had not done, and it changed the room.

She said: you have not asked me why I stopped.

I said I didn't know you started.

She said: 1976. Tehran. A hall not much bigger than this kitchen. Four years.

And then she told me about the twelfth minute.

She did not call it that. She said: *the part where somebody else is doing it.*

She said it used to come about a quarter of the way in and it would run for ten minutes or so and afterwards she never knew what she had said, and that her friend used to write it down for her, badly, and that she still has the pages and they are not the same.

I said: when did it stop.

She said: 1980.

I said: why.

She said: because I started waiting for it.

She said:

You cannot want it. It is not that wanting it is forbidden, it is that wanting it is a job, and the moment there is a person in there doing a job there is no room for the other thing, because the other thing needs the chair empty.

She said: you have been going onto stages for fourteen months with a second person already in there, waiting, watching the clock at eleven minutes.

She said: that person is very diligent and will never leave.

I said: so what do I do.

And she said: I don't know. I never found out. I waited for four years and then I was forty and it was over.

Then she asked if I wanted more rice.

HÄSSELBY · 4 oktober · 400 in · Persian

Four hundred. No camera. Last night before the tour starts.

I did not look at the clock once. Not because I had decided not to — I forgot. There was a woman in the second row with a laugh like a door and I got interested in her, and I went after her for a while, and it went somewhere I had not planned, and then

I came off at fifty-eight minutes.

I do not know what happened between roughly twelve and roughly twenty-six.

I have nothing. Not a fragment. There is a bit at the start about the fish and there is a bit at the end about my aunt and in the middle there is a hole with fourteen minutes in it.

My hands were shaking in the corridor and I had to sit on the steps.

Mahin was at the back with her arms folded, as she has been for nine years, and she heard every word of it.

I asked her what I said.

She looked at me for a while.

Then she said: no.

I asked again. I said I'm not going to try to do it again, I just want to know, I want to know what it was.

And she said: that is exactly what you would do, and you would do it on Tuesday, and it would be a very good version, and it would be a version.

She said: I had a friend who wrote mine down. I have the pages. I have read them eleven thousand times.

She said: do not do this to yourself. I am not being kind. I am being the only person in Europe who is qualified.

And then she said:

Four hundred people heard it. It happened. It was extremely good and I am not going to tell you how good. And you were there, and you were not there, and that is the arrangement, and if you can live

with the arrangement you will have it again and if you cannot you will not.

Then she asked whether I had eaten.

49.

She telephoned at two in the morning, Tehran time, which is midnight there, and did not say hello.

She said: it happened.

I said: what happened.

She said: fourteen minutes. I don't have any of it.

And then neither of us said anything for a while, on a telephone, at two in the morning, four thousand kilometres apart, and I sat in the chair with the radio on low and did not tell her that I have been sitting in a chair at three in the morning for twenty-seven years feeling rooms I am not in, and that between us we have one whole person.

50.

She said: are you still there.

I said yes.

She said: say something useful.

And I could not think of anything, and I said so, and she laughed — properly, out loud, on a telephone, at nothing, at me having nothing — and I felt it arrive under the breastbone at four thousand kilometres, correctly, on time, in the right place.

The tour starts in Rotterdam on the eleventh.

Eleven cities.

I am third.

GLOSSARY

Ahvaz [ah-VAAZ] — a city in the south-west of Iran, capital of Khuzestan province.

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.

Ghormeh sabzi [ghor-MEH sab-ZEE] — Persian, stewed herbs. A stew of finely chopped herbs, kidney beans, dried lime and lamb, considered the national dish.

Haft-sin [haft-SEEN] — Persian, seven S's. The Nowruz table, laid with seven items whose names begin with the letter sin, and conventionally also a mirror, candles and a goldfish.

Hässelby — a suburb in the north-west of Stockholm with a large Iranian population.

Javadiyeh [ja-vaa-dee-YEH] — a neighbourhood in the south of Tehran.

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

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

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.

Rowzeh [row-ZEH] — Arabic via Persian. A religious gathering at which a preacher recites the sufferings of Karbala and the assembly weeps.

Siyāh-mashq [see-YAAH MASHQ] — Persian, black practice. A calligraphic exercise sheet on which the same letters are written repeatedly across the page until the paper is nearly saturated with ink. Made as practice, discarded for centuries, and now exhibited as an art form in its own right.

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.

Twelve minutes into a set — never the first ten, never after twenty — she stops being the one doing it. Something else runs the room, and it is better than she is, and afterwards she cannot remember a word of what she said.

It has never happened in front of a camera. It has never happened in English. It has never once happened in Sweden.

She plays two rooms in one city on the same night. At eight, fifty Swedes who are attentive and generous and afterwards tell her she is very brave. At ten, four hundred Iranians who heckle in three registers and know exactly when she is lying about home. Neither audience knows the other exists, and nobody who books her can understand a word of the second one.

Then she brings over a comic who is not funny, and Europe falls in love with him.

Funny is a claim. Brave is a circumstance.



CHEW Z
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