

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 81



ONE WAS ONE WAS NOT

یکی بود، یکی نبود

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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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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اداره ثبت احوال
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۱۳۳۸

ثبت احوال
شهرستان خوی
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SYNOPSIS

A woman of seventy-four opens a door, looks at a man's hands for four seconds, and says: *You have his hands.*

She is not confused. Her husband's brother walked out of that country in 1364 and sent three letters and then nothing, and for forty-three years the family has held two doors open — he is dead, or he decided. Nobody has ever said the second one out loud.

The man on the step is fifty years old, has no papers in any name, and has been in that border town four months because a border town is the only kind of place where nobody asks a stranger anything.

He does not correct her. He takes his shoes off and goes in.

There is no uniform this time and no institution. Nobody appoints him, nobody checks him, and there is no document anywhere in the world that can be contradicted — because a family is not an institution, it is a story that a number of people have agreed to. Thirty people adjust, and by the end of the week it has always been true.

Then a truck comes into the yard and a young man of seventeen gets down, and recognises him in about a second and a half, and says nothing at all for eleven days.

One Was, One Was Not is written in two hands. It is the account of a man who has been five other men, and the ledger of a boy who has kept one since he was eleven — who runs a name that is not his on a fuel manifest, who prices everything including his own feelings, and who writes down, in his own book, at some length, that he is nothing like the man in the back room.

The Persian for *once upon a time* is یکی بود، یکی نبود. It means: *there was*

one, there was not one.

THE BOOKS BEFORE THIS ONE

Every book in this series stands alone and they may be read in any order. This page is for readers who have not read the others, and gives away nothing that would spoil them.

No. 67 — Sayyid of Nowhere. A career burglar walks out of a hospital in Mashhad wearing a dead cleric's clothes, taken off a chair because nobody was watching the chair. He does not look at the colour of the turban. It is black, which means claimed descent from the Prophet. He gets off a bus in a salt town at the end of a road intending to stay twelve days, is met by nine men who have been waiting eleven nights for a replacement custodian, and stays fourteen months. He cannot read a word of Arabic. He invents scripture, settles disputes, falls in love with the woman who runs the shrine kitchen and can conduct the whole affair only through liturgy at a distance of four feet, and is very nearly caught weekly by a nineteen-year-old seminarian named Mojtaba who ends up defending him. He leaves carrying one line out of a pilgrim register from 1357, beside his mother's name, that he has not been able to put down since.

No. 71 — A Steady Hand. He takes a bag off a luggage rack because it is unattended and he is what he is. Inside: a stethoscope and a Ministry of Health card. He gets off a bus in a village of four hundred people on a dying qanat and a man outside the shop stands up and says *Doctor? They said Thursday* — because they have been promised a locum for eleven months. He stays fourteen weeks. He cannot read a drug name. A nurse called Nasrin has been running that clinic alone and signing a broken doctor's name four hundred and eleven times, and knows the number. A woman lives who would not have. A boy of nine dies who might not have. And ninety feet down a qanat, in bad air, something corrects him about the register: *the fourth column is not for names.*

No. 74 — The Break Bell. He goes north-west because it is the only direction he has not used, and the pass shuts behind him in Azar

and does not open until Farvardin. Two hundred people in a gorge, a school with two rooms and forty children across six grades and no teacher since autumn, and a man in the shop who has been carrying

the keys for eleven weeks and is tired of it. He cannot read. So he makes forty children read to him instead, and it is the best teaching any of them ever have. A retired schoolmaster of seventy-one turns out to have been one of the students sent into the villages with a notebook in the winter of 1357, and finally explains what the fourth column was for — and it changes nothing, because the answer does not transfer. **And there is a boy of eleven in grade five called Hamed**, who runs the only functioning bank in that village out of the back of his mathematics book, who works out something about his teacher and never once uses it, and who is taken out of school in the spring to go and work. He appears in this book, and he is seventeen now.

No. 76 — *The Airing*. A driver goes to the wrong guesthouse, makes two telephone calls that are not answered, looks up a street and says *Aqa-ye bāzras?* — and a wanted man walks into a provincial prison from the front, in the daylight, with somebody holding the door. Nine days. Nobody says no to him for any of them. It is the first coat he has ever worn that could not do any good: an inspector can close a wing and end a career and cannot open one door or issue one blanket. He writes a report that is true and correct and unanswerable, and it fixes everything it was meant to fix, and it destroys the one decent man in that building.

What he is still carrying into this book: a daughter in Tehran who does not know who he is; an ex-wife who does, and who has his telephone number, and who asked him for one thing that he did not do; and a folded page with a name on it, written four times, belonging to a man who is alive somewhere and not far away, and an instruction not to go straight there.

THE STANDING

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

I am fifty. I have no passport, no bank account and no papers in my own name. I am wanted in three provinces under one name that is mine and four that are not, and I have not been in a room as myself since 1997, and I have stopped expecting to be.

The first was a burglar in Tehran, twenty-seven years, roofs and second-storey windows. I worked Thursday nights only, because Thursday night in this country the whole family is at somebody's mother's house, and I would not work Fridays because I did not believe in God and saw no need to be rude to Him. A man in Block Three called me Panjshanbeh for it. I was caught once, and of the twelve years I was given I served four.

The second was a sayyid. I came out of a hospital in Mashhad in a dead man's coat because it was on a chair and nobody was watching the chair, and I did not look at the colour of the turban folded on top. It was black, which means the Prophet's blood. I intended twelve days and a border and stayed fourteen months as the custodian of a shrine in a salt town at the end of a road.

The third was a doctor. There was a bag on a luggage rack with nobody under it, and in it a stethoscope and a Ministry card belonging to a man born eleven months before me. A village of four hundred on a dying qanat had been promised a locum eleven months earlier and had stopped expecting one. Fourteen weeks. A woman lived who would not have. A boy of nine died who might not have.

The fourth was a teacher, and it is the only one I would do again. The pass shut behind me in Azar and did not open until Farvardin: two hundred people in a gorge, forty children across six grades, no teacher since Mehr, and a man in the shop tired of carrying the keys. I cannot read. So I made forty children read to me, which was

the best teaching any of them ever had, and was the best teaching any of them ever had because I could not check one word of it.

The fifth was an inspector, for nine days, and it is the only one that had any power in it. It could close a wing and end a career and it could not open one door or issue one blanket. A decent man of fifty-five paid for what I wrote, and I would send it again, and both of those are simply true.

The people who are still in it.

Golnar, my daughter, twenty-three now, married, in Tehran. She does not know. She thinks I am a cleric who signed a paper for her once and gave her the only answer about her father she has ever been able to use, and I invented it in a courtyard in eleven minutes, and it was true, and she wrote it down on her telephone with her thumbs.

Mahnaz, who was my wife for seven years. She knows. She recognised me across a rented hall in four seconds and did not expose me — she counted me, and took my number, and asked me for one thing three years ago, and I did not do it. She has never once raised it. That is not forgiveness. That is bookkeeping.

Mojtaba, nineteen when I met him and long past that now, in a salt town, building a life on fourteen pages of an argument he made himself about a man who did not exist. He will find out in his thirties. I knew that when I took him and I took him anyway.

And a boy called Hamed, who was eleven, in the gorge, in grade five, and who ran the only functioning bank in that village out of the back of his mathematics book.

What I am carrying. One line in a pilgrim register from 1357 that I have not been able to put down. A folded page with a name on it, written four times in the hand of a schoolmaster who is dead, belonging to a man who is alive and not far from where I was going, and an instruction not to go straight there, which I have now obeyed for three years and which is beginning to look less like obedience. A date in Mordad that I owe. And a pair of shoes that came off a dead man in Mashhad and are half a size too big and always will be.

There is a poem about thirty birds who went a long way to find a king. I still have not read it. I have had it now from a well-digger, a schoolmaster, a prison librarian and an old woman with a bowl of herbs, and four of them told it wrong, and I told it wrong myself to a class of children and a girl of nine corrected me out of the book.

There is a duck in it who will not go, because he lives in the water and is therefore always clean, and cannot see why he should walk into a desert and get dirty.

His excuse is also a virtue. I have noticed that about him.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Every Persian story begins یکی بود، یکی نبود — *yeki bud, yeki nabud*. It is our *once upon a time*, and every child in that country hears it before they can hold a spoon, and almost nobody stops to notice what it says.

It says: *there was one, there was not one*.

One existed. One did not. It is the strangest opening formula I know of in any language — a story that begins by declining to tell you whether its subject is real — and it has been sitting at the front of every folk tale in Iran for centuries doing that quietly.

This is a book with two men in it, and one of them does not legally exist, and it is written in two hands.

That second part frightened me. Four of these accounts have been one man alone in a room writing twenty years after the fact, and the register of that voice is the whole series: slow, retrospective, deadpan, built. Putting a seventeen-year-old next to it risked either drowning him or turning him into a smaller copy.

So Hamed does not reflect. He **prices**. He writes in the present tense, in numerals, in short lines, in a ledger he has kept since he was eleven, and he is funny in a way that Nader is not, which is that he does not know he is being funny. He costs out his own feelings the way he costs out a tyre. He is confidently wrong about things at length and never finds out. He believes he is keeping a business record.

And he attributes his best instincts, more than once, to *somebody*, without ever noticing that it is always the same somebody.

The other thing I wanted was a fraud with no institution behind it. A cleric has a shrine; a doctor has a ministry; a teacher has an education office; an inspector has a province. Every one of those can be checked, and in four books every one of them eventually was, and what caught him each time was not suspicion — it was **accounting**.

A family cannot be checked. There is no register of who belongs to whom. Nobody in your own house could prove their relationships to a

stranger, and neither could you, and neither could I. What holds it together is that a number of people all tell the same story and have been telling it since before any of them can remember, and it has never once been audited.

So: put a stranger inside a story that thirty people have agreed to, and there is nothing at all to detect. The only thing that can end it is somebody looking in a tin.

A word on the road, since the whole book sits on it. Fuel here is subsidised and has been for forty years — the one thing in this country that has genuinely stayed cheap — and across a border it is worth something like twelve times more. Nobody arranged that. It is two governments making two different decisions and a line on a map between them, and whole provincial economies have grown in the gap, and a great deal of the moving is done by boys, because a boy is cheap and a boy can be put on somebody else's licence.

There is no drug in this book. The fourth altered state in this series is the twenty-sixth hour of a haul with a cracked exhaust manifold and the window shut in Dey, which is not a substance, and is documented, and kills people every winter, and does not frighten you first.

And it does not happen to Nader. That is the point of it, and of the book.

Chew Z

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PART ONE — THE DOORSTEP

One to Eight

ACCOUNT 1

In the salt town I wrote lessons. In the clinic, notes. In the gorge, questions. In the prison, findings.

This one I am not going to name, because it is not mine alone and I did not know that when I started it.

I am fifty. I have been five men and I am going to be a sixth before this is finished, and I would like to record at the front that the interval is getting shorter and that I no longer wait to be mistaken for anything. In the prison a driver said *Aqa-ye bāzras* and I got into the car in four seconds and did the arithmetic on the way, and I said at the time that this was the honest sentence of my life: I am a man who cannot decline.

Three years since then. I am not going to account for all of it. Some of it was a warehouse and some of it was a bus station in a town I will not name and none of it is interesting, and a man who has been four remarkable things in five years should be extremely careful about the years in which he was nothing, because those are the years that tell you what he is.

I did a small amount of work for my former wife in Mordad of 1406 and I did it badly and it is not finished. That is a debt and it is in the back of my mind at all times and it will not be settled in this account either, and I am aware of how that reads.

I came to the border in the autumn of 1409 for a bad reason.

The good reason, the one I would give you if you asked me in a tea house, is the folded page. There is a name on it, written four times in the hand of a schoolmaster who is dead now, and a man told me beside a truck in the snow that the person it belongs to was alive and not far from where I was going and that I should not go straight there.

I did not go straight there. I have now not gone straight there for three years, which is beginning to look less like obedience and more like a decision.

The bad reason, and the true one, is that a border town is the only kind of place in this country where nobody asks a stranger anything.

Everyone is passing through. Everyone has business they would rather not describe. Half the economy is a thing that is technically not permitted and is entirely open, and a man with no papers in a town like that is not remarkable, he is **the standard specification**.

I have never been anywhere so restful. Four months.

And then a woman of seventy-four opened a door and made a decision about me in four seconds, and I have thought since that the reason it worked is that I had been in that town long enough to stop watching for it.

ACCOUNT 2

I had gone to that house about a room.

That is the whole of it. There is a woman in the bakery who told me the Rasouli house sometimes let the room at the back, and I went up there on a Tuesday afternoon in Aban with the intention of paying two months in advance, which is the correct opening move in a house you want no questions from.

Golbanu Rasouli [gol-baa-NOO raa-soo-LEE] opened the door.

Seventy-four. Small, upright, with the particular stillness of a woman who has run a large household for fifty years and has stopped needing to move quickly for anything.

She looked at me.

I want to describe the four seconds accurately because I have had four seconds four times now and this is the only one I did not see coming.

On a bus a driver kissed my hand. In a square nine men came out of the dark. In a shop a man put four keys on a counter. In a street a driver said two words and I got into a car.

Every one of those was a **transaction**. Somebody wanted something delivered — a shrine, a clinic, a school, an inspection — and I was the delivery. I could see the shape of it in the first

half-second every time, and I have never once been wrong about that shape.

This woman wanted nothing.

She stood in a doorway and looked at my face for four seconds, and something in her went a very long way, and came back, and settled.

And she said:

“You have his hands.”

I said nothing at all, which is the only skill I have that has never let me down.

And she said, “Come in, come in, you’re letting the cold in, God, look at you,” and turned round and went into her own house and left the door open behind her, and I stood on that step for about eleven seconds.

I want to state what I understood in those eleven seconds, because I understood almost all of it immediately and went in anyway.

She was not confused. She was not senile and she was not mistaken in the way people are mistaken about a face in a crowd. Something had been open in that house for a very long time, and a man of the right age had come up the path, and it had **closed**.

And she had not asked me anything.

That is what did it. In four buildings across five years, every mask I have worn was handed to me by somebody who then immediately began asking me for things — a Friday sermon, a diagnosis, a lesson, a report.

I stood on that step and worked out, correctly, that nobody in that house was going to ask me for anything at all, and that all I had to do to be somebody’s brother-in-law was walk in and take my shoes off.

So I did.

ACCOUNT 3

There is no uniform.

I have been thinking about that for three years and it is the whole difference and I did not see it for six weeks.

A coat on a chair in a hospital. A card in a bag on a rack. Four keys on a counter. A lanyard in a car. Every one of them is an **object**, and every one of them can be taken off, and every one of them has an institution behind it that will eventually notice.

There is nothing to take off in that house.

Nobody appointed me. There is no register, no roster, no wing list, no ministry, no form with three stamps on it. There is no document anywhere in the world that says I am Golbanu Rasouli's brother-in-law, and there is therefore no document that can be checked, and no discrepancy that can be detected, and no accounting that can catch up with me — and I have spent five years being caught, every single time, by accounting.

I want to set the mechanism down properly because it is what the whole thing runs on.

A family is not an institution. It is a story that a number of people have agreed to.

That is all. There is no external verification anywhere in the system. Nobody in that house could prove their own relationships to a stranger if you asked them to, and neither could you, and neither could I. What holds it together is that thirty-odd people all tell the same story about who is who, and they have been telling it since before any of them can remember, and it has never once been audited.

Put a new person into that story and one of two things happens. Either the story rejects him, immediately and completely, in about a day —

Or somebody with standing says *this is Bahman's brother*, and thirty people adjust, and by the end of the week it has always been true.

Golbanu had the standing. She is the eldest surviving thing in that family and she said it in the kitchen on the first evening in a completely ordinary voice, as a piece of household information, between two other pieces of household information.

Nobody checked. There was nothing to check with.

By Azar I had a place at the table on Thursday nights, which in this country is not a small thing and is not a metaphor either, and a nephew of about thirty was asking my opinion about a piece of land.

ACCOUNT 4

They supplied the evidence themselves. All of it. I did not manufacture one single item and I want that in the record because it is the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened to me and I still do not entirely believe it.

Here is how it works, and anybody who has read the first four of these will recognise it, and it is the same instrument every time in a different building.

In a mosque I said four clauses of Arabic I had invented and two hundred and forty people filled the silence with whatever they had brought in with them, and a man wept about a brother I had never heard of.

In a house at the end of a lane in a border town, I said almost nothing for eleven weeks, and thirty people filled it in.

He has his hands. — Golbanu, on the doorstep, before I opened my mouth.

He does that thing with his tea. — A niece, in the second week, delighted, about a thing I do with my tea which I have done all my life and which several million men in this country also do.

You still can't sit still, can you. — Her son, laughing, in the third week. I had been sitting perfectly still.

He's got the temper. You can see it. He's just learned to hold it. — About a man who has never once raised his voice in his life, and

who they had decided was concealing something because a man who does not raise his voice must be.

And then, in the fifth week, the one that stopped me.

An old man in that lane, who is not family and who I had assumed was the danger, took my hand and said: **"I remember when you were born."**

He believed it. He was not being polite. He produced a detail — a thing about a snowfall — and he was pleased with himself for remembering it, and everybody agreed that the snow that year had been terrible.

I want to be exact about the thing I understood in that lane.

They were not being fooled by me. They were doing something on their own, and I was standing in the way of it.

A family that has waited forty years for a man to come back is not passive. It is a machine that has been running the whole time, generating small pieces of him every year — a story, a resemblance, a habit somebody remembered and improved — and the machine had produced forty years of extremely specific material about a man who was not there.

And then a man of fifty came up the path with the right kind of hands, and every piece of that material had somewhere to land.

I did nothing. I want that understood, and I want it understood that it is not a defence.

I did nothing, for eleven weeks, and let thirty people who loved somebody put him on me piece by piece, and by Dey I could not have got out of it if I had wanted to.

Which, and this is the finding, and I have not been able to write anything else honest about that autumn:

I did not want to.

ACCOUNT 5

Manouchehr Rasouli left this country in 1364 and nobody in that house has said the word *dead* out loud in forty-five years.

I got the whole of it in pieces over about a month, the way you get everything, and I have assembled it here in an order that nobody ever told it in.

He was the middle brother. There were four. He was twenty-two in 1364, which was the war, and he went out through this same border in the winter, on foot, with two other men and a guide, and the arrangement was Turkey and then wherever Turkey led.

There were three letters. The first from Van, the second from Istanbul, and the third — and everybody in that house can quote the third — from somewhere in Europe, undated, four lines long, saying that he was well and working and would send an address.

That was 1366.

Forty-three years.

Now. I want to lay out the position properly, because everybody who hears this assumes a family in denial and that is not what this is and it is much more interesting than that.

They are not in denial. **They are in a state that has no name in English and I am not sure it has one in Persian either.**

Golbanu's husband — Bahman, the eldest, and I would like it noted that my own father was called Bahman, which is the commonest name in the country and which I nevertheless heard in that kitchen every day for four months — Bahman died in 1381 and was buried, and there was a funeral, and everybody wept, and it was finished.

Manouchehr was not buried, because you cannot bury a man who is well and working and will send an address.

So the household runs a small permanent arrangement. There is a room. It is not a shrine and there is nothing morbid about it whatsoever; it is used for storage and the children play in it. But nobody has ever taken the bed out.

At Nowruz there are chairs for a number of people, and the number has never been reduced.

And once, in Bahman, Golbanu said something to me across a kitchen that I have carried since, and she said it while doing something with rice and not looking up.

She said: "The worst thing is not that he is dead."

I said nothing.

And she said, "The worst thing is that if he is alive, he decided."

Forty-three years of the second possibility. That is what that house has been holding, and holding it is the entire reason a woman of seventy-four looked at a stranger's hands on a doorstep and let the door swing open behind her, and I understood that in Bahman and by then I had been eating at her table for three months.

ACCOUNT 6

I want to write down what it offered me and I have been putting it off for two chapters.

Every previous coat gave me a **function**. The shrine gave me a job I could do; the clinic gave me a room where I was useful; the school gave me forty names; the prison gave me a clipboard and nine days of a power that turned out to be entirely negative.

This one gave me a **place at a table on Thursday night**.

That is all it gave me and it is the only one I ever wanted.

I want to be extremely careful here because this is the chapter where a lesser man would reach for something, and I am not going to.

I was not happy. I have been happy: twenty minutes on a dispensary floor discussing a generator starter, and forty children in a yard, and a woman putting a colander down. This was not that.

What it was is that for the first time since I was seventeen years old, **there was nowhere I was going next**, and I stopped doing the thing I have done every hour of my adult life, which is to hold a portion of my attention in reserve for the exit.

I did not notice it for a month. Then one evening in Azar I was sitting against a wall in that kitchen with about eleven people in the room and a child on the floor doing something with a plastic animal, and I realised that I did not know where the door was.

I had been in that room a hundred times and I could not have told you which wall the door was in without turning my head.

I have never in my life not known where the door was. Not in a stairwell, not in a cell, not in a mosque with two hundred and forty people in it.

I sat against that wall and my whole body went cold, and then it went warm, and I have thought about that reversal more than about anything in this book.

And the other thing, which is smaller and worse.

Golbanu called me *dear* about eleven times a day.

It is nothing. It is what women of that age call every man in a house; my own mother called the electricity man *dear*. It is the most ordinary word in this language.

Nobody had said it to me since 2019.

I did the arithmetic in that kitchen on a Thursday evening — ten years, and the last person to say it was a woman on a telephone who was already finished with me — and then I went out into the yard and stood there for a while and came back in and ate my dinner.

ACCOUNT 7

Golbanu told me the birds in the kitchen in Azar and she got them wrong, and I have now had this poem told to me four times by four people and every single one of them told it wrong except the schoolmaster, and I got it wrong myself in front of a class of children and a girl of nine corrected me out of the book.

I have started to think the poem is not a text at all. It is a thing that is passed by hand in a damaged condition and repaired badly by everyone who touches it, and that this may be the whole of what a tradition is.

She was doing something with herbs. That is not a detail I have added; women in this country are always doing something with herbs when they say the important thing, and I have written that sentence once before about my own mother and I am aware of it.

She said there is a poem where all the birds go to look for their king, and they have to cross seven — she thought — mountains.

And each one says why he cannot go.

She could remember the duck.

The duck says: *I live in the water and I cannot leave it. I am always in the water and therefore I am always clean, I perform my ablutions constantly, I am the most correct bird here. Why would I go into a desert where there is no water and get dirty?*

Golbanu found this extremely funny and had to stop.

Then she said, "He's not lying, that's the thing. He is clean. He is the cleanest one there."

I asked what happens to him.

And she said, "He stays in the water," and put the herbs down, and said, "Eat something, you're like a stick."

I did not think about it at all for four days.

Then I was walking down that lane on a Thursday evening and it arrived, in the way these things do, sideways and from nowhere and about eighty per cent unwelcome:

a man who has moved through four provinces in five years, and has told himself every single time that the moving is the search.

The duck has an excuse that is also a virtue, and a life that is also a refusal, and he has never once had to say *I am afraid to go*, because he has a better sentence available and it is entirely true.

I have been telling people for three years that I am looking for a name on a folded page.

I have not looked for it in three years. I have been in this town for four months.

ACCOUNT 8

The truck came in on a Tuesday in the first week of Dey, at about five in the afternoon, and I was standing in the yard because Asadollah Rasouli [a-sa-dol-LAAH] had come to see his mother and I had been sent out with the glasses.

It is a Benz. Everything on that route is a Benz of a certain age, and this one had been kept properly, which tells you something about the man who has it.

Asadollah is Golbanu's second son. Fifty-one, sixteen years on that road, and one of the three or four most competent people I have met in five years, and I want to say now, before any of the rest of it, that everything Asadollah does in this book he does for correct reasons and that I have never been able to find the place where he is at fault.

The passenger door opened and a young man got down.

Seventeen or eighteen. Not tall. Cheap jacket, good boots — I noticed the boots, because a young man who spends his money on boots and not on a jacket is a young man who has worked out what actually matters, and there are not many of them.

He came across the yard and kissed his grandmother's hand and said something to her that made her hit him on the arm, and then he took the glasses off me without being asked and carried them in.

And that was the whole of it.

I did not recognise him.

I want to be exact about why, because I have been asked and the answer is not sentimental.

The last time I saw that boy he was eleven years old and he was walking out of a classroom door in a gorge in Farvardin and he did not look round.

Between eleven and seventeen a human being is comprehensively replaced. The face is not the same face; the bones move. He was two hundred and eighty kilometres from that gorge in a province I had no reason to connect with it. He was wearing a name I had never heard.

And the thing that would have given him away instantly — the ledger in the back of the maths book, the seeds, the way he stands when he is about to ask you for something — none of it was on display, because he had already recognised me and had decided, in about a second and a half, to say absolutely nothing at all.

He had eleven days on me before I had one on him.

I have thought about that a great deal and I have decided I am proud of it, and that being proud of it is probably the worst thing in this book.

PART TWO — THE MANIFEST

Nine to Seventeen

ENTRY 9

Tue. Left the yard 04:10.

Queue at the crossing 9 trucks which is nothing. Moved 06:00 which is late but not the worst, the worst was Mordad, 14 hrs, I do not want to talk about Mordad.

Costs:

tea 15,000

bread 40,000

the man at the barrier 200,000, standard, no argument

I want to say I did not haggle at the barrier and this is not weakness. You do not haggle at a barrier. You haggle in a yard. Different rooms, different rules. Somebody told me that.

Load fine. Uncle A. drove the second half because my eyes were going, which he does not make a thing of, which is why I work for him and not for Hossein who pays 12% more and talks.

Home 17:00. Grandmother's.

—

There is a man staying at the house.

He is supposed to be my great-uncle. Everybody says great-uncle. My grandmother says it like it is a fact about the weather.

He is not my great-uncle.

I have 3 things and I am not going to spend them. An answer you have already spent is worth nothing. Somebody told me that as well, actually I think I worked that one out myself.

1. He does the thing with the corners of a room.

You come into a room and if you are normal you look at who is in it. He looks at all four corners first and it takes him about one second and then he looks at the people, and he does it every single time, including in a kitchen he has been in 100 times. I have only ever seen one other person do that and I was 11 and I did not know what it was then either.

2. He does not look at anything that is being handed to him.

I gave him the tray back on the second night and he took it without looking at it. Everybody looks. You look because you do not want to drop it. He does not look because he already knows exactly where it is, which means he has been tracking it the whole time it was in my hands, which is a lot of attention to spend on a tray.

3. He agrees with people too fast.

This is the big one. When my cousin Reza said something stupid about the road he said “yes” straight away and then said nothing, and Reza kept talking and dug himself into a hole about 2 metres deep and my great-uncle just sat there being agreed with. He does this constantly. He never disagrees with anybody about anything and everybody in that house thinks he is the most reasonable man they have ever met and he has not said one single thing since Aban.

I am going to work out the rest before I say anything.

—

He is 50 and his hands do not match his face. His face has had a hard time. His hands are the hands of somebody who has never carried anything, no callus, nothing, and they are the first thing my grandmother mentioned about him, which I did not think about at the time and I am thinking about now.

—

I have eaten nothing since Tabriz.

My mother makes a thing with aubergine that I am not going to describe here because this is a work document.

Diesel is 3,000 a litre here and 12x that on the other side which is why any of this exists and if anybody wants to have a discussion about whether that is right I will have it, but not tonight, because I have been awake since 03:00 and there is rice.

ACCOUNT 10

I want to explain why I did not know him, and then I want to explain what I actually did notice, because I noticed something on the first evening and I filed it under the wrong heading, which is a thing I have now done in five consecutive books and have never once learned from.

On the Tuesday he took the glasses off me without being asked.

That is not nothing. Boys of seventeen do not take things off men of fifty in this country without being asked; the entire architecture of the household prevents it, and a boy who does it is either badly brought up or is making a point.

He was not badly brought up.

And what I thought — I am reporting my own thinking exactly and I would like a moment of silence for it — what I thought was: *he wants something from his uncle and he is establishing himself as useful in front of the family.*

Which is what a seventeen-year-old is normally doing and which was completely wrong.

He was not establishing anything. He was getting close enough to look at my hands.

The second thing I noticed was on the Thursday. He came into the kitchen while I was sitting against the wall and he did not look at me.

Not once, in about forty minutes, in a room where everybody looks at everybody.

I have been in a great many rooms with people who were pretending not to look at me. Police do it badly. A frightened man does it worse. In four years inside I learned the difference between a man who is not looking at you and a man who is **not looking at you**, and it is one of the very few things I would still bet money on.

That boy was working, and he was good, and it was the best not-looking I have seen since Vakilabad.

And I filed it under: *he has done something and is worried about it.*

Which is also what a seventeen-year-old is normally doing. And which was wrong again.

I had four days of him before I had one clear thought about him, and the clear thought when it came was not a suspicion, it was a piece of professional appreciation, and I had it on the Sunday in the yard while he was doing something to a tyre.

I thought: *whoever taught that boy did a decent job.*

I have had twenty years with that sentence.

ENTRY 11

Somebody is going to read this one day and think it is about crime so I am going to explain it once, properly, and then not again.

Diesel here: **3,000 a litre.**

Diesel on the other side: **36,000 a litre**, give or take, depends on the week.

That is 12x. Nobody did anything to make that happen. It is not a scheme. It is one government deciding for 40 years that fuel should be cheap for its own people, which by the way is the one thing in this country that has actually stayed cheap, and another government not deciding that.

Put a line on a map between those two numbers and the line becomes a **job**. That is all a border is. A border is a place where a number changes.

So:

A truck that is licensed for the route carries a legal load and legal fuel in its own tanks. The tanks on ours are large because they are supposed to be, it is a long road. Whether the tanks on ours are **larger than they are supposed to be** is a question I am not going to answer in a book, and anybody from the province reading this can come and measure them.

The margin is not in the tanks anyway. Everybody thinks it is in the tanks. The margin is in **how many times you go**, and how many times you go depends entirely on the queue, and the queue depends on 4 men, and 3 of the 4 men are reasonable.

Uncle A. has been on that road 16 years. He knows all 4. He does not pay more than the standard and he does not pay less, and he has never once been stopped for longer than an hour, and both of those facts are the same fact.

Now the part that is actually about me.

I am 17.

You cannot hold a licence for that route at 17. You cannot hold a lot of things at 17 and I have counted them: a licence, a bank account that does anything, a passport without my father, and a rented room in your own name.

So there is a name on the manifest and it is not mine.

It is a real man. He is 26 and he is my uncle's wife's cousin and he is in Tehran and he does not drive, and he gets a small amount every month for the use of it, and the arrangement is 4 years old and I inherited it from a boy who turned 21 and went to do something else.

I have driven 41 runs under that name.

I want to write down that this does not feel like anything. That is the honest answer. People think it must feel like something. It does not. You say a name at a barrier the way you say your own, and after about the 6th time it **is** your own, and the only moment it is strange is when somebody uses my actual name in a yard and it takes me half a second, and that half a second is the only part of any of this that ever frightens me.

Cost tonight: nothing, ate at my grandmother's.

The great-uncle sat against the wall and did not say anything for 40 minutes.

I counted. He said 11 words all evening and 4 of them were "yes."

Everyone thinks he is wonderful.

ACCOUNT 12

By the sixth week they had begun to plan around me and I did not notice until it had already happened, which is the whole of my defence and it is not one.

Here is what planning around a man looks like, and it is not dramatic and there is no moment.

In the third week Golbanu said, in a general way, that the room at the back had damp in it and something should be done before Esfand. In the fifth week her son Reza said he would look at the room at the back in Bahman, and Golbanu said, without any emphasis at all, that Bahman was too late.

In the sixth week the roll of insulation appeared in the yard.

Nobody said the words *for him*. Nobody has ever said the words *for him*. A roll of insulation arrived in a yard and leaned against a wall for eleven days and then a man came and did the room, and I was not consulted about any of it and would not have been, because you are not consulted about a house you live in.

And a woman at the bakery asked me — casually, as a piece of village business — whether I would still be here in Farvardin.

I said probably.

She said, “Good,” and that was all, and by the following week two other people had asked me the same question in the same tone and I understood that they were not asking, they were **confirming a thing they had already been told**, and that somewhere in that house a sentence had been said about Farvardin that I had not been present for.

I want to put down what that does to a man in my position and I am going to be honest about it and it is not what you would expect.

It should have frightened me. Every previous coat had a clock on it and I could hear the clock from the first day — twelve days and a border, four days, four months until the pass opens, nine days of an inspection. The clock is the thing that makes it survivable.

This one has no clock.

And instead of that frightening me it did something much worse, which is that I began, quietly, without deciding to, **to make plans of my own.**

Small ones. I want to be precise about the scale of them because the scale is the point. I thought about the room at the back and whether the window would take a bar, which is a thing I have thought in every room I have ever been in, and then I thought about it a second time in a completely different way, which was whether it would take a **curtain.**

I have never in my adult life thought about a curtain.

That is the extent of it. A man of fifty stood in a yard in Azar and thought about a curtain for about eleven seconds, and I am putting it in this account because it is the exact moment that the thing began, and because in five books it is the largest single change that has ever occurred in me and it is a curtain.

ENTRY 13

41 runs.

I have been thinking about what I wrote last night and I want to add something because I do not think I was honest.

I said saying the name does not feel like anything. That is true at the barrier. It is not true everywhere and I am going to write down where it is not true, because this is my ledger and a ledger with things left out of it is worthless, which is not something somebody told me, that is just obvious.

It is not true at the doctor.

I broke a finger in Aban of last year, the small one, closing a side door badly. Nothing. Six weeks.

I could not go to the clinic in town because they take your details and the details would be the wrong details, and if you turn up at a clinic with a name that does not match your face they do not call anybody, they just look at you and something goes into a drawer somewhere and you have no idea when it comes out.

So my uncle's wife strapped it with a bit of card and it is fine, it is completely fine, it just does not go all the way straight.

I want to be clear that this is not a complaint. It is a **cost**. Everything is a cost and you either write it in the book or you are lying to yourself.

Cost of the arrangement, so far:

- one finger, minor
- the half second in the yard
- cannot open an account, so everything is cash, so everything is in one place, so if the place goes, everything goes
- cannot rent anything, so I live at my uncle's
- if anything happens on that road, the man who comes to tell my mother will have the wrong name in his mouth

That last one I only thought of about 4 months ago and I have not been able to get rid of it.

—

The great-uncle asked me about the truck today.

Not about the route. Not about the money, everybody asks about the money. He asked what year the engine was and then he asked whether the second tank was original.

I said yes.

He said "mm" and then he did not ask anything else, and he did not look at me at all while I answered, which is exactly the thing I wrote down on the first night.

He knows.

He has known since about the third day and he has not said one word and he is not going to, and I have spent the whole evening trying to work out whether that is because he is a good man or because he has something of his own, and I already know the answer and I do not like it.

Nobody protects a stranger for free.

Somebody told me that. I do not remember who.

ACCOUNT 14

Golbanu Rasouli is not fooled and has not been fooled for one second, and I want to set out how I know and then I want to set out what she is actually doing, because it took me until Bahman and it is the strangest thing anybody has ever done to me.

How I know.

In the ninth week, in the kitchen, she said: "You were a terrible boy about the plums."

I said I did not remember the plums.

And she said, "No," and went on doing what she was doing.

That is all. There were no plums. There has never been a plum in this account. She put a fact in front of me that I could have picked up and used — every man I have ever met would have picked it up, it is free, it costs nothing, *ah yes, the plums* — and I did not pick it up, and she said *no*, and moved on.

She did it four more times in four weeks. A dog. A wedding at Kermanshah. A thing about his knee. Every one of them offered, every one of them declined, and every time she said *no* in the same completely level voice and went on with what she was doing.

She was **testing the seams**, once a week, for four weeks, and I passed every test by failing it, and both of us knew exactly what was happening and neither of us said a word about it.

What she is actually doing.

I got this wrong for a month. I thought she had decided to let it stand because it was easier, or because she is seventy-four and tired, or because the house needed the story to be finished.

That is not it and it is not close.

Here is what she is doing, and she has never said it and never will, and I worked it out in a yard in Bahman while she was hanging something out.

If Manouchehr is dead, then a man has died alone in a foreign country and nobody sat with him and there was no funeral and his mother is in the ground not knowing.

If Manouchehr is alive, then he **decided**, in 1366, at twenty-four, that this family was a thing you could put down, and he has been putting it down every day for forty-three years, and every single Nowruz there has been a chair.

Those are the two doors and she has been standing between them since before I was born.

And a third thing came up the path in Aban.

A man who is not her brother-in-law, who she knew was not her brother-in-law inside four seconds, who has nowhere to be and nobody to answer to and hands with nothing on them, and who **can be given the chair**.

She is not mistaken. She is not sentimental. She is a seventy-four-year-old woman who was offered a third door after forty-three years of two, and she took it in four seconds on a doorstep, and she has been holding it open ever since with a completely straight face.

I am not being deceived in that house.

I am being used, carefully and knowingly, by the most competent person I have met in five years, for a purpose she has never once stated.

And the terrible thing — the thing that made me put down a glass in a yard in Bahman — is that I have finally met somebody who does exactly what I do.

She looked at a man on a doorstep and read the whole of him in four seconds and priced him and put him to work.

That is my mother's trick. That is the only thing I have. And I have spent five years congratulating myself on it in four buildings full of people who could not do it, and then a woman of seventy-four did it to me on her own front step in the time it takes to say hello.

ENTRY 15

11 days.

I have said nothing for 11 days and I want to write down why, because I have been asked, by myself, at 3am, on a road, which is where I ask myself things.

Reason 1: an answer you have spent is worth nothing.

I have 9 things now, not 3. If I go to my grandmother and say *this man is not who he says*, I have spent all 9 at once and what do I get? She says something. Everyone looks at me. And then it is over and I have nothing.

Whereas if I hold it, I have it. Every day I do not say it, it is still there in the morning.

That is not cleverness by the way. That is just how a debt works. A debt you have not called in is an **asset**. A debt you have called in is an argument.

Reason 2: I do not actually know what he is doing.

This is the one that stops me. If a man turns up at a house and gets fed, that is a thing I understand and it is not even a crime, half the country would do it.

But he is not eating much. I have watched. He eats about the same as my grandmother.

He has not asked anybody for anything. In 11 weeks. Not money, not a job, not a favour, not to hold something, not to sign something. My cousin Reza asks for something every 4 days and he actually is family.

So what is he taking?

I have gone through it maybe 20 times. Nothing is missing. There is nothing in that house **to** be missing. The most valuable thing in it is a carpet that is not worth the trouble and everybody's gold is on their own arms.

Which means either he is very patient and playing a long one, or he is not taking anything, and I do not have a category for a man who is not taking anything.

Reason 3. I am not going to write reason 3.

—

I will write it.

He looked at me on Sunday. About one second. I was doing the tyre.

And he did the thing where he looks at you and it is not like being looked at by an adult, it is like being **read**, and I have had that exactly once before in my life and I was 11 and it was in a room with a bad wall and it was the only time anybody ever bothered.

I do not want to say anything yet in case I am wrong.

That is reason 3.

—

Costs today: 0. Slept.

ACCOUNT 16

Mahnaz rang on the last Tuesday in Bahman and it lasted about ninety seconds and there is one thing in it.

I have owed her since Mordad of 1406. That is three years and four months. She named a date, the eleventh of Mordad, and a man called Davoud, and one room and one hour and the coat, and I said yes in about a second and I said at the time that it was the first thing anybody had ever asked me for.

And then on the eleventh of Mordad I was in a room above a tyre place four hundred kilometres away finishing nineteen pages that ended a decent man's working life, and I posted them, and I did not ring her, and I have never in three years been able to write down why.

She did not raise it. That is the thing about that woman. Three years and four months and she did not mention it once, and I understood in about the fourth month that not mentioning it was not forgiveness, it was **bookkeeping**. It is not a debt she is going to argue about. It is a debt she is going to call.

She said: "Where are you now?"

I said the north-west.

She said, "Still?"

I said still.

And then she said, "You sound different."

Now. I have been on a telephone with that woman perhaps eleven times in four years and she does not remark on things. She reports, she instructs, she prices. She does not say *you sound different*.

I said I was eating better.

And she said, "Mm," in a way that I have thought about ever since, and then she asked whether I had a room, and I said I did, and she said, "A room or a house?"

And I did not answer for slightly too long.

And Mahnaz said, "Ah."

That is all. One syllable, on a telephone, from four hundred kilometres away, from a woman who had four seconds of me in a rented hall three years ago and has never needed more than four seconds of anybody.

Then she said the thing she rang to say, which was about Golnar, and which is not mine to put in this account and which I am not going to, and then she said she would ring again, and put the telephone down.

I stood in that yard for a while.

Because here is what *ah* meant, and she knew I would know, and that is why she used one syllable instead of a sentence.

It meant: **you have stopped.**

Five years of being unfindable, and the only person on earth who has my number worked out from two seconds of hesitation on a bad line that I had gone to ground in a house.

And that is dangerous for me, and both of us know it, and it is not the reason it went through me.

It went through me because she was not warning me.

She was **noting it down**.

ENTRY 17

I want to put something in writing because I have been thinking about it for 3 days and I would rather have it in the book than in my head.

I am nothing like him.

I am writing that because on Thursday my grandmother said, laughing, that we sit the same way, and everybody in the kitchen laughed, and I laughed, and then I went out to the truck and sat in it for 20 minutes.

Here is the difference and it is not small.

He is hiding. I do not know from what yet but a man does not turn up at a stranger's house at 50 with nothing and no story unless something is behind him.

I am working. There is a difference between a false name you use to get a job done and a false name you use to be somebody. Mine is on a manifest. It is on a piece of paper with a load number and a weight on it and when the run is finished the paper goes in a file and nobody reads it again.

His is on a **person**. He is wearing a whole man. He sits in that man's chair at Nowruz.

That is not the same thing at all and anybody who says it is the same thing has not thought about it.

Also:

He does not ask for anything, which I said was strange, and I have worked out what is strange about it. **A man who asks for things can be refused.** A man who never asks for anything cannot, and so nobody in that house has ever once had the chance to say no to him, and 11 weeks later he has a room and a chair and a place at the table on a Thursday and not one single person ever agreed to any of it.

That is not the same as what I do. I ask my uncle for the run. He can say no. He has said no twice.

So: not the same.

—

Costs today:

tea 15,000

a thing for the truck 340,000 which I will get back

0 else

I sat the way I sit and my grandmother laughed and I do not think it means anything.

PART THREE — THE TWENTY-SIXTH
HOUR
Eighteen to Twenty-Six

ENTRY 18

Left 03:40 Sun.

This is the last run before Esfand and it is a bad one and everybody knows it is a bad one, which is why the rate is 40% up, which is why we are doing it.

Reasons it is bad:

- weather coming in from the north-west
- the crossing shuts at 20:00 on a Thursday now which is new
- Uncle A. has a chest thing and should not be in a cab

That last one is the actual reason and nobody has said it.

He has had it 3 weeks. He says it is nothing. He said "it is nothing" in the exact voice my mother uses when she says it is nothing, which is a voice I know very well, and I have decided I will do the long side and he can do the short side and I will not make it a discussion because if you make it a discussion with him he does the opposite.

—

Load: 22 tonnes, legal, papers correct, nothing interesting.

Fuel: full, both tanks, and I am not going to write any more about the tanks.

Costs so far:

diesel 0

tea 15,000

bread 60,000 (2 days)

Plan: up tonight, over tomorrow if the queue is human, back Wed.

If we are not back Wed it is because of the queue and not because of anything else and I am writing that here in advance so that if somebody reads this later they know I was not being stupid.

ENTRY 19

Queue.

I am writing this in the cab because there is nothing else to do.

14 hrs so far.

That is not the record but it is close and I do not want to talk about Mordad.

What happens is: nothing happens. That is the whole thing. Nobody tells you anything. There is no board, there is no man who knows, there is no number. There are 31 trucks and there is a barrier and at some point the barrier does something.

The 4 men are not on. That is the problem. The 4 men I know are not on and there is a 5th man I have never seen and Uncle A. does not know him either, and when Uncle A. does not know somebody he becomes extremely polite, which is how I know it is serious.

We are 9th.

Uncle A. is asleep in the bunk which he never does and I am not going to write anything else about that.

—

Things I have done in 14 hrs:

- walked to the front and back twice, 40 min each
- bought tea 3x
- counted the trucks 4x, got 31 every time except once when I got 32 and that was a van
- slept 20 min, badly
- thought about my grandmother's house

Cost of a queue: nobody puts this in a book but somebody should.

14 hrs is 14 hrs of a driver, 14 hrs of a truck, and 22 tonnes of somebody's load sitting in a field. Nobody pays for it. It does not appear anywhere. It is not in any number that anybody in Tehran has ever looked at.

If you added up every hour every truck has sat at that barrier in one year you would have a figure that would frighten somebody, and nobody has ever added it up, because the person who would have to add it up is standing at the barrier.

Anyway.

Moved 06:00. **Total 15 hrs 40.**

ENTRY 20

Over. Unloaded. Turned round.

Uncle A. is not right. I am writing it here because I am not going to say it to him.

He did the short side and by the top of it he was grey and he sat in the passenger seat for 40 minutes with his hand on his chest doing the thing where you breathe carefully so nobody notices you are breathing carefully.

I said I would do the whole way back.

He said no.

I said I would do the whole way back.

He looked at me for a while and then he said "all right" and that is the first time in 41 runs he has said all right to me about anything, and I did not like it at all.

—

Awake since 03:00 Sunday. It is now 05:00 Tuesday.

I have done the arithmetic and I am not going to write the number down because writing it down makes it a fact.

There is a thing with the exhaust. It started on the way up, a smell, and it comes and goes and it is worse when the window is shut, and the window is shut because it is Dey and it is minus something and there is a man asleep beside me with a chest.

I checked the manifold at the top and I could not see anything and it was dark and I was tired and I want to write down here, honestly, that I did not check it properly.

I have 340 km.

I have done 340 km tired before. Everybody has. You do the thing where you count the posts, and you do the thing where you say the alphabet backwards, and you sing, and you open the window for 30 seconds every so often which I cannot do tonight.

I am going to write down what I have eaten because that is a thing I can control:

bread, this morning

tea 4x

half a thing my aunt gave me which I do not know what it was

That is not enough and I know it is not enough.

Going now.

ENTRY 21

I need to write this down before I lose it and I have already lost some of it.

Somewhere after the second bridge. I do not know the hour. It was dark and then it was still dark.

I was in the classroom.

Not remembering it. In it.

The small room, no, the big room, the one for grades 4 to 6, and I was at my desk which was second row on the left with the leg that was shorter, and Reza Naderi was next to me and his shoes were wet and I could smell them which is a thing I have not thought about in 6 years.

The blackboard was bent. It was painted so many times the wood went curved so a straight line came out with a bend in it and everybody in that school thought that was what a straight line did.

There was snow on the window, packed at the bottom of the glass.

The stove was on and there was bread on it and there were gloves.

And there was a man sitting on the edge of the front desk.

He was not holding a book. That is the thing I noticed then and it is the thing I noticed now. He never held a book. Every teacher we ever had stood at the front holding the reader in one hand and he did not, not once, not ever, and at 11 I thought it was because he knew it all.

He was leaning forward with his arms on his knees and he was listening to somebody.

And then he looked at me.

And he said something.

—

I have been trying for 2 days to write down what he said and I keep writing it and it is not it.

It was 4 words. It might have been 5.

It was not advice. It was not anything special. It was the kind of thing he said 40 times a day to 40 children, in that flat voice, without making anything of it.

And I said something back to him. I know I did. I heard my own voice in the cab.

—

Then I was at the third bridge with both hands on the wheel and the window was down and it was freezing and I do not know who put the window down.

Uncle A. was awake. He was sitting up.

He said, "You were talking."

I said I knew.

He said, "You were **answering.**"

And then he said, "Pull in."

ENTRY 22

I did not pull in.

I want to be clear because Uncle A. has told the story since and he tells it wrong and he tells it in a way that is nicer to me than what happened.

He said pull in and I said no and I drove another 4 minutes, which is the stupidest 4 minutes of my life, and then I stopped, because of the thing the man said.

I am going to try one more time.

It was about the window.

That is all. It was a small ordinary sentence about a window and about air, and it was the sort of thing he said constantly in that room in that winter because 40 children in a room with a stove in Dey is a thing he was always going on about, and everybody thought he was strange about it, and he did the thing with the form and the stamp and got the flue replaced in 11 days and everybody's mothers talked about it for a month.

I had not thought about that in 6 years.

I stopped the truck and I got out and I could not stand up properly and I sat on the step for a bit and then I opened the engine cover with the torch and I looked at the manifold with the light actually on it, which I had not done at the top, and there is a **split**. It is not big. You cannot see it in the dark and you cannot hear it and it goes into the space behind the bulkhead which goes into the cab.

Uncle A. came round and looked at it and did not say anything for a while.

Then he said, "How long has that been like that."

I said since the way up.

He said, "How long have you had the window shut."

I did not answer.

—

Here is the part I have been avoiding.

He was asleep in that bunk for 6 hours on the way up with the window shut and the split open and a chest that is not right.

He is 51.

If I had done the last 340 km the way I was going to do them — window shut because it is Dey and there is a sick man beside me and I am being **considerate** — then somewhere around 05:00 there would have been a truck on a road with two men in it and one of them would not have woken up and the other one would not have noticed for a while.

I want to write down that I did not save anybody. Uncle A. says I did and I want it in the book that I did not. I stopped because I heard a man say something about a window and I was not thinking about carbon anything, I was not thinking at all, I stopped because I was told to by somebody who was not there.

That is not the same as saving somebody.

But the manifold is real and it is in the yard now and anybody can go and look at it.

—

Costs:

new manifold 4,200,000

2 days

0 else

Uncle A. has not said anything about it since and I do not think he is going to.

ACCOUNT 23

He came to the house on the Friday and asked me, in the yard, in front of nobody, whether I had ever taught.

I want to record my exact physical state, because it is the third time in five years that a boy has walked up to me with something in his hands and the previous two occasions cost me a great deal.

I said no.

That is not a lie in the way that most things in these five accounts are lies. I have never taught. I ran a school for four months because a man in a shop was tired of carrying the keys and because there was no road out, and the entire content of my method was that I could not read and therefore had to let forty children read to me. That is not teaching. I have said so before and I will go on saying so and I am aware that nobody believes me, including a seventeen-year-old in a yard in Dey.

He looked at me for a while.

Then he said: "Did you ever say anything about a window?"

And I said no.

He said, "You did not say anything to a class about opening a window? In a school? In the winter?"

And I said no.

Now.

I want to set down carefully what was true when I said that, because it matters and because I have gone over it eleven thousand times.

I did not remember.

That is the whole of it. I had condemned a heater in a gorge with a form I invented and a stamp I did not own, and I have written that up at some length and I am proud of it and it is the one clean thing I own. I remember every part of that: the folder of circulars, the child's dictionary, the copy line, the eleven days, the pipe coming up on the snow tractor.

I do not remember saying anything to anybody about a window.

I would have. Obviously I would have. I sat in that room after they had gone one Thursday afternoon with the stove going and the door shut for forty minutes and then went outside and was sick in the snow, and a man who has done that says something about air to forty children every single day for a month and does not remember one of the times.

So when he asked me, I said no, and it was true, and it was also the least true thing I have ever said.

He did not press it. He stood there for a moment and then he asked me something about the second tank and I answered it and he went in.

And that is the whole of the conversation and neither of us has mentioned it since.

ENTRY 24

He said no.

I asked him twice and he said no twice and he did not blink and he did not do the thing people do when they are lying, which is that they add something.

Liars add. Everybody adds. You ask a man if he was at the yard and he says no and then he says *why, what happened*, because the silence is unbearable to him. He said no and then he stood there and let it be no.

So either he is the best I have ever seen, which he might be.

Or it was not him.

—

I want to write down the options because that is what you do.

1. It was not him and I dreamed it. Fine. I was awake 26 hrs and I had a cracked manifold pumping God knows what into a cab for 14 of them. That is the answer. Anybody would say that is the answer.

Problem: the manifold was real. I found it because of what he said. If I dreamed it then I dreamed a thing that was correct about an engine I could not see in the dark, and I do not care what anybody says, that is not what dreaming is.

2. It was him and he does not remember.

I did not think this was possible until yesterday. Now I think it is the answer.

Here is why. I asked my mother once what she said to me when I broke the finger. She said she did not say anything. I remember exactly what she said. She said it 4 times.

People do not remember the ordinary things they say. Only the person they said them to remembers.

Which means that if you say a thing 40 times a day to 40 children for 4 months, you remember none of it, and 40 children remember all of it, and 6 years later one of them is on a road at 3am and it comes back with the exact voice on it.

That is not a ghost. That is just how a person gets into somebody.

3. I am not going to write 3.

—

I will write 3.

3 is that it does not actually matter whether he said it, because I heard it in his voice, and there is only one man whose voice is in me like that, and I have spent 11 weeks working out who this man is and I have had the answer since the second bridge.

—

Costs: 0.

I have not told anybody. Not my uncle. Not my grandmother. Not him.

An answer you have spent is worth nothing.

But I want to write down, here, in my own book, where nobody is going to read it, that I have been carrying it around for 4 days and it is not like carrying the other 9 things.

The other 9 were assets.

This one is heavy.

ACCOUNT 25

The boy and I were straight with each other for the first time on the last day of Dey, in a yard, about a truck, and neither of us said one true thing.

He asked me to look at the second tank.

I want to explain what that is, because it is an offer and it is a large one and it is made in a language that has no words in it.

There is nothing wrong with that tank. Both of us knew there was nothing wrong with that tank. What there is, is a question about that tank that a man does not ask another man unless he has decided something, and he had asked me the question three weeks earlier — *was the second tank original* — and I had said *mm* and asked nothing further, and he had gone away and written something down about it.

So he asked me to look at it. Which meant: *come and stand next to me at the thing I would go to prison for.*

I went and stood next to him.

We looked at the tank for about eleven minutes and said almost nothing, and what we said was entirely about brackets, and it was one of the four or five most honest conversations of my life.

At the end of it he said, not looking at me, "You have not asked anybody in that house for anything."

I said no.

He said, "Why not?"

And I gave him the true answer, which I have not given to anybody in five books, and I gave it to a seventeen-year-old in a yard because he had asked me a straight question at the right moment, which almost nobody ever does.

I said: "Because then they could say no."

He did not say anything for a while.

Then he said, "That is what I thought," and got a spanner.

And I stood in that yard and understood that this boy had already worked out the load-bearing mechanism of my entire adult life, on his own, and had written it down somewhere, and had been sitting on it for weeks, and had just told me so in four words while looking at a bracket.

I have been in rooms with police. I have been in a room with a warden who had a theory about me and eight years to prove it.

Nothing has ever frightened me like a boy of seventeen saying *that is what I thought* about a spanner.

ENTRY 26

Uncle A. went to the doctor. **Finally.**

I did not make him. My grandmother made him, in about 4 seconds, in the kitchen, by saying his father's name in a particular way. I want that technique written down somewhere because it is the most efficient thing I have ever seen and there is no counter to it.

It is his heart. It is not the worst version, it is the version where you take a thing every day and you stop lifting and you do not do 26 hrs in a cab.

He cannot do the route.

Not "should not." The doctor said should not, my grandmother said cannot, and in that house the second one is the one that is real.

—

So. Arithmetic.

The truck is paid off. That is the good news and it is the only good news.

The run needs 2. Legally 1 but really 2, because 340 km each way and a queue that can eat 15 hrs means one man does not sleep, and I have now had a very specific demonstration of what one man not sleeping produces.

I am 17. I cannot hold the licence, so the licence is a name in Tehran, and that name is 26 and does not drive and the

arrangement has been fine for 4 years because there has always been a **real** licensed man in the cab, which was my uncle.

Take my uncle out and what is left is a 17 year old with a fake name driving a truck alone on a route where the queue is 4 men and one of them is new.

That does not work. I have gone at it 6 ways and it does not work.

Options:

- stop. Family has no income. No.
- Hossein, who pays 12% more and talks, and who would want the truck. No.
- find a second man. With what money, and who, and how do I explain a 17 year old giving orders.

—

There is a man in that house who is 50, has no papers anybody has ever seen, has never asked anybody for anything, was a teacher for 4 months in a gorge, and is not anybody's uncle.

I am not going to ask him.

I am writing that down so that when I do ask him I will be able to see, in my own handwriting, the exact day I knew I was going to.

PART FOUR — THE LEDGER

Twenty-Seven to Thirty-Four

ACCOUNT 27

The letter came to the house in the second week of Bahman and it was not a letter, it was a message passed through four people, which is how everything that matters travels in this country and always has.

A woman in that town has a cousin in Germany. The cousin knows a man in a Persian association in a city I am not going to name. The man mentioned, in the ordinary way, that there is an old Iranian in that city, from the north-west, who has been there since the eighties and does not come to anything and is not well.

And the name he gave was **Manouchehr Rasouli**.

I want to describe what happened in that house and I have never been able to do it properly and I have had twenty years.

Nothing happened.

That is the thing. There was no shouting and nobody wept. Golbanu was told in the kitchen by her son Reza, who had it from his wife, who had it from the woman at the bakery, and she was doing something with rice at the time, and she stopped, and put the pan down, and stood with her hands on the edge of the counter for about eleven seconds.

Then she picked the pan up again.

And she said, "Well."

That is all she said that day. That is all anybody said that day. Eleven people came through that kitchen in the following four hours and every single one of them had been told and not one of them raised it, and the house went on exactly as it had gone on, and at about nine in the evening a nephew put the television on.

Here is what I understood, standing against a wall in that kitchen, which is where I have understood everything worth understanding in five years.

For forty-three years that family had held two doors. He is dead, or **he decided**.

And a message from four people away had just closed one of them.

He is alive. Which means he decided. Which means every Nowruz chair, every unremoved bed, every time somebody said *he will send an address*, was a thing done for a man who was sitting in a room in a European city with a telephone.

Nobody said that out loud. Nobody was ever going to say it out loud. But everybody in that house did the arithmetic in about four seconds and then put the television on, and I have never in my life seen a room decide something so completely without a word being spoken in it.

And I stood against that wall with my tea and understood the second thing, which is my part in it, and it arrived about ninety seconds after the first.

I am now standing in the space of a man who is alive and chose not to.

Not a dead man. A living one.

ENTRY 28

I want to write down what happened in that kitchen because everybody has been very calm and I do not think anybody is calm.

My great-uncle Manouchehr is alive in Germany.

Facts:

- alive
- has been alive the whole time
- 4 people between us and him
- the man says he is not well, which could mean anything, my mother says "not well" about a cold

What nobody has said:

That he could have written. There is a post office. There has been a post office for 43 years. There is a telephone in that kitchen and there has been since 1379 and the number has not changed once, my grandmother made sure of it, and I did not know why until Tuesday.

She kept the number so he could ring.

43 years of paying for a line so that a man could ring it.

—

I am not angry. I want to write that down because everybody keeps looking at me as if I am about to be. I am 17 and the youngest in that kitchen and everybody has decided I am the one who is going to say the thing nobody is saying.

I am not going to say it. Not because I am good. Because it has already been said. Everybody in that room said it silently at about the same time and then Reza put the television on, and that is what happened, and adding words to it now would only be **me** doing something.

—

What I actually thought about, and I am ashamed of this one:

the arithmetic changes.

If he is alive and he is not well and he is old, then at some point there is a thing about the house and the land, and my grandmother is 74, and Reza has a wife and 3 children and no money, and there is a man in Germany who has a claim and has never once been here.

I thought about that about 20 minutes after I found out. Before I thought about my grandmother. Before I thought about anything.

I do not like that about myself. I am putting it in the book because a ledger with things left out of it is worthless.

—

Then I thought about the other thing, which is:

What happens to the man in the back room?

Because he is standing exactly where Manouchehr would stand. And now Manouchehr is not a story any more, he is a man in a city with an address, and one day somebody is going to get on a plane or a letter is going to arrive, and then there will be two of them, and one of them has been eating at that table since Aban.

I do not think he has worked that out.

Actually I do think he has worked that out. He worked it out before any of us. He was standing against the wall in the kitchen with his tea and he did not move for about 4 minutes and I watched him not move.

ACCOUNT 29

Golbanu came out into the yard on the Thursday and stood next to me and neither of us said anything for about two minutes, which is a long time in a yard.

Then she said, "You will be wondering what happens now."

I said I was not wondering anything.

And she said, "You are the only person in that house who is not."

Then she told me what she was going to do, and it took about forty seconds, and it is the coldest and cleanest piece of work I have ever watched anybody do, and I want it in this account exactly.

She is not going to write to him.

She is not going to send the four people back the other way with a message. She is not going to ask anybody in Germany to visit him, and she is not going to have the address found, and nobody in that family will ever be told not to, because telling them not to would be an instruction and an instruction can be disobeyed, and she does not give instructions.

She is simply not going to do anything at all.

And in about three months, or a year, everybody in that house will have quietly understood that the matter is not going forward, and nobody will ever have decided it, and the chair at Nowruz will go on being there because taking it away would be a decision too.

I said, "He may not have known how to come back."

And Golbanu Rasouli, seventy-four years old, in a yard, in Bahman, said:

"He knew how to leave."

—

I want to put down what I did with the rest of that conversation, because I did something and I have never been sure it was right.

I said — carefully, because I have been in that house four months and I know exactly what I am — that she might want to think about the land and the house and what a man in Germany can claim.

And she looked at me.

And she said, "Ah. So that is what you are."

Not unkindly. That is the thing I cannot convey. There was no accusation in it whatsoever; she said it the way you identify a bird.

And I said no, and I meant it, and I said that I was not asking for anything and had not asked for anything and would not.

And she said, "I know. That is what I have never been able to make sense of."

Then she said, "Come in, it is cold, God, look at you," and turned round and went into her own house and left the door open behind me, exactly as she had done on the first afternoon in Aban, and I stood in that yard for a long time.

She has done that to me twice. Once when I arrived and once when I told her the truth, and both times she turned round and walked away from me and left the door open, and I have never been able to work out whether that is the largest kindness anybody has ever done me or the most precise thing anybody has ever done to me.

ENTRY 30

Cost of this week: 0. Nothing has moved.

I want to write about my grandmother because I have been getting her wrong.

I thought she was the kind old one. Every family has one. You go there, you get fed, she says you are like a stick, she does not know anything about anything and it is restful.

That is not what she is. That is a **shape she uses**, and I did not see it for 17 years because I was inside it.

Things I have now worked out about my grandmother:

1. She has not asked the man in the back room a single question. Not one. In 4 months. Everybody else in that family has asked him 40 questions each. She has asked him none, and she is the one who let him in.

2. She keeps the telephone number. 43 years. She has told nobody why and everybody assumes it is sentiment. It is not sentiment. It is a **line she is holding open** and holding a line open costs money every month and she has paid it every month for 43 years, which is not sentiment, that is a decision made 516 times.

3. When Reza told her about Germany she put the pan down for 11 seconds and picked it up again. I timed it. I did not mean to time it, I just count things.

4. She is not going to do anything about it and she has not said so.

That last one took me a week to see and I only saw it because of what she did **not** do, which is the hardest thing to notice.

—

I have been thinking about how you would describe her method and the closest I can get is this:

She never gives an instruction, so there is never anything to disobey.

She just does not do the thing, and does not do it for long enough that everybody around her stops expecting it, and by the time anybody notices there was a decision, the decision is 6 months old and was never made.

That is exactly what the man in the back room does. He never asks for anything, so nobody can refuse him.

Same trick. Opposite direction. One of them uses it to get into a house and the other one uses it to keep a family from tearing itself apart over a man in Germany.

I have been sitting in that kitchen since I was born and I never once saw it, and it took a stranger turning up in Aban for me to be able to see my own grandmother.

I do not know what to do with that so I am putting it in the book.

ENTRY 31

I have kept this book for 6 years.

I want to explain what it is because I have never explained it to anybody and if I am going to keep writing in it I should be honest about what I am doing.

It started as the seeds.

I was 11. I bought sunflower seeds and gum in town when my uncle went, and I sold them in the yard at school, and nobody had money, so I ran credit. And you cannot run credit in your head with 31 names in it, so I wrote them in the back of my maths book upside down so that if a teacher opened it he saw fractions.

31 names. What they owed. When.

And a mark against 4 of them which meant I was never going to collect, and I never told those 4 and I never will.

I crossed them all out on my last day. All 31. I have written about that before, in a different book that I burned, and I am not going to write about it again except to say that I did not do it to be good. I did it because I was leaving and a debt you cannot collect is a **liability**, it sits in your book and makes the numbers wrong, and I wanted a clean book.

I have kept one ever since. 6 years. This is the 4th.

Loads, costs, hours, the barrier, the queue, what things weigh, what things cost, what I ate.

And one other column.

—

The other column is at the back, upside down, same as when I was 11, because I never stopped doing that either.

It is names.

Not people who owe me. **People I owe.**

There are 9 in it. My mother, obviously, and my uncle, and a man in Tabriz who did a thing for me in 1405 that I am not going to write down. Against each one there is what it was and there is a number, because everything can be given a number if you are honest, and I am honest in this book if nowhere else.

7 of them have a number and a date and some of them are settled and marked.

2 of them have no number.

One of those 2 is my grandmother and that is because you cannot put a number on a woman who has fed you 4 times a week for 17 years and I have tried and the number is stupid.

The other one is a name I wrote in Farvardin 1406 when I was 11 years old, in a truck, going down out of the gorge, on the first page of the first book.

And there is nothing next to it.

Not a number. Not a date. Not a note. I wrote the name and then I did not know what to write in the second column and I left it, and I have opened that page maybe 200 times in 6 years and I have never once been able to put anything in it.

I know what he did. I can list it. 40 names in one morning. A pot on a stove that was not on anybody's ledger. A stove that got fixed in 11 days. He haggled with me over seeds, which nobody had ever done, and he beat me down to 1.5x, and I have never once in 6 years been able to work out what that was worth.

You cannot price a thing that changed what you are. There is no number. The number is either 0 or it is everything and neither of those goes in a book.

—

He is in the back room of my grandmother's house.

He has been there since Aban. I have known since the second bridge, and I said nothing for 11 days and then I said nothing for 11 more, and now it is Bahman and I have still said nothing.

I am not holding it as an asset any more. I want to be honest about that. I stopped holding it as an asset somewhere around the manifold.

I am not saying it because I do not know what happens after I say it, and there is only one line in that book with nothing next to it, and once I say his name out loud in that house I have to put something in the second column.

ACCOUNT 32

I worked out what I actually taught that boy on a Tuesday in Bahman, in the yard, watching him do something to a bracket, and it went through me like cold water and I had to go and sit down.

I have been telling this story for five years and I have been telling it as a comedy.

A man who cannot read runs a school. He makes forty children read to him because he has no choice. It works better than anything, because he has nothing to check against and therefore has to listen. Very good. Everybody laughs. I have got four months of material out of it and I have been quietly proud of the whole thing for six years.

That is not what I taught him.

Here is what I taught him, and I did it in the first ninety minutes of the first morning and I have never once thought about it again until that yard.

I stood in front of thirty-nine children and I closed the register and I said: *I am not going to read your names. You are going to tell me your names.*

I did it because I could not read the handwriting.

And what forty children learned in that room, in that ninety minutes, is that **the thing the paper says about you is not the thing.** The register was on the desk. The register had all of them in it, correctly, in a proper hand, and the man at the front put it down and said it did not matter and asked them instead.

I did that every day for four months. Every lesson. A child stood up and recited and I could not check a word of it and so I listened to the child instead of the text, and I made a great deal of that at the time, and it is in one of these books as a joke.

And then a boy of eleven with a ledger in the back of his maths book watched a man ignore the official document in favour of the person in front of him, four times a day, for a hundred and twenty days.

And that boy is now seventeen and is driving a truck under a name that is not his.

I want to be precise about the charge, because I have been accused of a great many things in these accounts and most of them fairly, and I want this one stated correctly.

I did not teach him to lie. He does not lie particularly; he is more honest than I have ever been.

I taught him that the document is not the man.

That is a true thing. It is possibly the only true thing I know. It is the thing that let me bless a kitchen and put a woman in a car at eleven at night and get a flue replaced in eleven days, and I would not take one of those back.

It is also the exact sentence that puts a seventeen-year-old in a cab with somebody else's name on a manifest, and a broken finger that did not get set because he could not go to a clinic, and a mother who would be told the wrong name if anything happened on that road.

He worked it out at eleven, for nothing, from a man who thought he was being kind.

I worked it out at seventeen, alone, on a landing in Tehran, and it cost me twenty-seven years and four in Vakilabad and I am still paying.

The difference between us is that nobody taught me. I want that to be a defence and it is not one. It is the opposite. **Nobody taught me and I turned out like this. He was taught, and he is turning out like this faster.**

I sat down on a crate in that yard and could not get up for a while, and he asked me if I was all right, and I said it was my back.

ENTRY 33

I asked him.

Friday. Yard. He was doing nothing, which he does a lot, he is very good at it.

I said the route needs 2 men and my uncle cannot do it and I cannot do it alone and I am asking.

He said, "I have no licence."

I said I know.

He said, "I have no papers of any kind."

I said I know that as well.

And he looked at me for about 4 seconds and then he said, "How long have you known?"

And I said, "Since the second bridge."

—

He did not do anything with his face. I want that written down because I have been thinking about it for 2 days. Most men do something. He did not.

Then he said, "You were eleven."

I said I was 11 and I could read a room at 11 because somebody spent 4 months making 40 children read out loud to him instead of reading to them, and that whatever else he thinks he was doing in that gorge, **that** is what he did.

He did not say anything for a long time.

Then he said, "The window."

And I said yes.

And he said, "I do not remember saying it."

And I said, "I know. That is what makes it true."

—

I did not plan that. I want to be clear. I do not talk like that and I have never said anything like that to anybody in my life and I have gone over it since and I do not know where it came from.

He put his hand on the truck.

Then he said, "I will do the driving. You do the talking at the barrier."

Which is the wrong way round. I am 17 with the fake name and he is 50 with nothing at all. He should do the talking. He is better at it than any man alive.

I said so.

And he said: "No. If it goes wrong, one of us has to be a boy who was employed by his uncle."

—

I have written that down 3 times tonight and crossed it out twice.

He gave me the version where I am innocent.

That is what that sentence is. He worked out, in about 2 seconds, the arrangement in which if it all falls over I am a kid who did what he was told and he is a man with no papers who cannot be anything else anyway.

He did not say that. He said one sentence about a barrier.

—

The name in the back of the book still has nothing next to it.

I am starting to think that is not because I cannot price it.

CHAPTER 34

The first run was on the eighteenth of Bahman and we did not talk for the first hundred kilometres.

Then he asked me, without any preamble, what my mother was called.

I told him.

He said he had never known that, and I said no, he would not have, because in that school we said our own names and one true thing and mine was that my brother had a motorcycle, and he said he remembered the motorcycle.

We did another forty kilometres.

Then I said that in the third week he had put a pot on the stove, and that everybody thought it was because he could not finish his own food, and that eleven or twelve of us ate out of it that winter and it was never on anybody's ledger and nobody ever owed anything for it, and that I had understood at about fourteen why he had done it that way and not the other way.

He did not answer for a while.

Then he said: "It was not every day. On purpose."

And I said I knew. And he said, "Why," and it was a real question, he wanted to know if I had it.

And I said: because a thing that happens every day becomes a thing you are owed, and a thing you are owed can be taken away.

And he said, "Yes."

That is all he said. He said yes and he looked at the road.

We did the rest of it in the dark and got over at nine in the morning and the queue was four trucks, which never happens, and neither of us said anything about that either.

PART FIVE — ONE WAS NOT

Thirty-Five to Forty

ACCOUNT 35

We did eleven runs together between the eighteenth of Bahman and the end of Esfand and they were the best six weeks of my life, and I have thought very carefully about whether to write that sentence and I am going to leave it in.

I am not going to give you the runs. There is nothing in them. Diesel and a queue and a barrier and four hundred kilometres of a road I now know the way I used to know a street in Tehran, and a boy in the other seat who talks about margins for two hours and then goes quiet for an hour and then says something that takes the top of your head off.

What I will give you is the shape of it, because the shape is the finding.

I was not pretending to be anything.

That is all. That is the whole of it. In that cab I was a man of fifty with no papers who could drive, sitting next to a boy of seventeen with somebody else's name on a manifest, and both of us knew exactly what the other one was, and neither of us was performing.

Five years. Four buildings. Two hundred and forty people in a mosque, four hundred in a village, forty children in a gorge, ninety men in a prison — and the total number of human beings in front of whom I have been myself is **one**, and he is seventeen, and he found me out in a second and a half in a yard and then said nothing for eleven days out of pure professionalism.

I did not enjoy it at first. I want that on the record because it is the least flattering thing in this account. For about the first four runs I was in a low continuous discomfort that I could not name, and I named it somewhere on the road in Esfand, and what it was is this:

I had nothing to do with my hands.

There was no room to read. No posture to hold. Nobody to be silent at for eleven seconds. Nobody was going to fill anything in about me, because the one man in the cab already had all of it.

I have run on that machine since I was seventeen years old and in that cab it was switched off, and for four runs I did not know what I

was, and by the sixth I stopped noticing, and by the eleventh I was talking about brackets.

ENTRY 36

11 runs. Here is the actual accounting, because somebody should have it.

Gross over 6 weeks, after the barrier and the fuel and the 2 repairs: **more than my uncle cleared in the same 6 weeks last year**, and I have checked it twice.

Why:

1. 2 real drivers means no 15 hr sit with one man awake, which means you take runs you would otherwise not take, which is where all of it is.

2. He is better at the barrier than my uncle and my uncle is good. He does the thing where he agrees with them immediately and then says nothing and they talk themselves into a shorter answer. I have watched him do it 11 times and I still cannot do it and I have been trying.

3. He does not haggle in the wrong room. I said in this book once that you haggle in a yard and not at a barrier and that somebody told me that. He is the somebody. I worked that out in Esfand and had to stop the truck.

—

Costs of the 6 weeks, honest:

manifold 4,200,000 (Dey, before)

brake thing 1,900,000

2 tyres 6,400,000

the barrier, standard, 11x

tea, uncountable

Costs not in money:

- my uncle sitting in a yard watching his truck leave without him,
11 times

- my grandmother knowing exactly what we are doing and never once asking

- the fact that if it goes wrong, the arrangement he built means I walk and he does not

That third one I did not agree to. He arranged it in one sentence about a barrier and I did not have the words at the time and now it is 6 weeks old and it is how it works.

—

I want to write down one more thing and then I am going to stop for tonight.

On the 9th run, coming back, about 4am, he said out of nothing: "Do not do this at fifty."

I said what.

And he said, "Any of it. Do not still be doing any of it at fifty."

And then he did not say anything else for 80 km.

I have not been able to put that anywhere. It is not in the costs and it is not in the names at the back. It is just sitting in the book.

ACCOUNT 37

The end came from the direction nobody was watching, which is how it always comes, and it was not the barrier and it was not the papers.

A cousin in that family — not Reza, a younger one, and he did nothing wrong and I want that stated first — got it into his head that somebody ought to go to Germany.

Not to bring Manouchehr back. He had understood, the way everybody had understood, that nothing was going forward. He simply thought, being twenty-six and decent and not able to leave a thing alone, that **somebody ought to see him**, and that it should be family, and that he would go.

And he began, in the ordinary way, to gather what you need. A photograph for the association. Dates. The name of the village his father came from. The name of the third brother.

And the small stack of documents that a family keeps in a tin.

I want to be exact about what is in that tin, because there is nothing sinister about it and it exists in every house in this country: birth entries, a marriage, two deaths, a photograph from 1349, and the identity papers of people who have died and whose papers nobody has ever surrendered because nobody knows where you would take them.

And he laid it out on the kitchen table on a Thursday afternoon to sort it.

And there was no fourth brother.

There never had been. Golbanu's husband Bahman was the eldest, then Manouchehr, then a sister who died in 1359. **Three.** It is on the entries in a clerk's handwriting from 1338 and it has been in a tin in that kitchen the entire time.

I have been in that house five months as the brother-in-law of a woman whose husband had one surviving brother and I have never once been asked to be anybody in particular, because Golbanu said *this is family* in a kitchen in Aban and thirty people adjusted, and nobody ever asked which one.

The cousin looked at the papers for a while.

Then he looked up at his grandmother.

And Golbanu Rasouli said — in the completely ordinary voice she uses for household information, without hurrying, while doing something with a cloth —

"Yes. He is not."

CHAPTER 38

He is standing against the wall by the door, where he stands, and everybody in that room turns round to look at him.

He does not move at all. Not his hands. I have never seen anybody not move like that and I have thought about it since and I think it is not calm, I think it is a man who has been rehearsing this exact four seconds for 30 years and has got very good at it.

And Reza says: "Who are you?"

And I said, "Nader Fani."

Nobody knows what that is. It is a name and it means nothing to anybody in that kitchen and there are 9 people in there and none of them move.

I have not said it out loud in a room since 2021.

My grandmother is at the counter with the cloth and she has not turned round.

And she says — not to him, to Reza, in the same voice she uses about the rice —

"He knows that. I told him in Aban."

She did not tell me in Aban. She told me on a doorstep in four seconds without a word, and I understood it, and I went in anyway, and the difference between those two sentences is the whole of what I am and she has just taken it away from me in front of nine people.

And Reza says, "Then why—"

And she says: "Because I wanted somebody in that chair and I was not going to wait any longer."

That is the first time in five years that anybody has said the true sentence out loud in a room I was standing in. Not me. Her.

And then she turns round and looks at all of them and she says, "He has taken nothing. Ask him. Ask him what he has taken."

Nobody asks.

I want to write down that nobody asks. 9 people in a kitchen and 5 months of a stranger at that table and not one of them can think of a single thing.

Reza sits down.

I have been in a great many rooms at the moment they turn. I have never been in one that did not.

Nobody threw him out. That is the thing I want in this book. There was no shouting. My grandmother put the cloth down and said the food was going cold, and it went cold anyway because nobody ate, and at about 10 my aunt started clearing up, and it was over.

It was not over.

It was over.

ACCOUNT 39

I left on the fourth of Farvardin, before Sizdah, which is the correct time to leave a house in this country if you do not want a goodbye, because everybody is somewhere else.

Nobody asked me to go.

I want that in the record because it is the only time in five books that I have walked out of somewhere on my own decision, and I have spent five books explaining that I have never once left anywhere — that the paperwork catches up and I move, and that this is drainage rather than a decision.

There was no paperwork. There was never going to be any. A family is a story that a number of people have agreed to, and thirty people had agreed to me, and nine of them found out in a kitchen and the story did not break, and I sat in that house for eleven more days and was fed four times a day by a woman of seventy-four who called me *dear* in front of everybody.

I left because I could not do it.

That is the finding and it took me five books to arrive at and I am not proud of it. I can be somebody in a building. I have done it four times and I was excellent at it. I cannot be somebody in a **kitchen** where everybody knows, because a mask that everyone has agreed to look past is not a mask at all, it is a chair with your name on it, and I would have had to sit in it as myself.

Golbanu knew I was going about four days before I did.

She did not say anything. She did not do anything either, which by then I understood is the same thing in that house and is the stronger of the two. On the third of Farvardin she put a bag on the bed in the back room. Not a suitcase. A cloth bag, of the kind you take to a bakery.

There was bread in it, and a jar of something, and a pair of gloves that were not mine and were exactly my size.

I did not say goodbye. She was in the kitchen and I could hear her and I stood in the passage for about eleven seconds and then went out through the yard.

Six men.

A burglar. A sayyid in a salt town. A doctor on a dying qanat. A teacher in a gorge. An inspector with a lanyard. And a brother-in-law who was never anybody's brother-in-law and never once said he was.

And I want to put down the thing I understood at the top of that lane, because it is the reason this account has two hands in it and I did not plan that and could not have.

For five years I have counted them as **separate**. Six men, one at a time, each one a coat that came off. I have been extremely careful about the counting; it is the only thing my head does on its own.

They are not separate. There is one man and he has done one thing six times, and the proof of it is not in me at all — it is in a seventeen-year-old in a cab who can read a room at eleven paces because of a register I did not open in 1405, and who runs a name that is not his, and who put a pot on nobody's ledger.

I did not leave anything behind in that house.

I left it in him six years ago and I have been watching it walk around ever since.

ENTRY 40

He went on the 4th.

I knew on the 2nd. Not because he said. Because he oiled the boots.

He does them twice and leaves them overnight and he has done that exactly 3 times since Aban and every time it was before a road.

I did not go and see him off. I thought about it for about an hour and then I did not, because I have watched that man for 5 months and the one thing he cannot do is be thanked, and standing at the top of a lane at 6am would have been a thanking whatever either of us said.

So I did the other thing.

I got up at 5 and I put a piece of paper in the bag my grandmother left on his bed.

On it I wrote the name he taught 40 children with, which was not his, and under it I wrote the name of a man in Tabriz who owes me from 1405, and the words *he will do papers, say I sent you, do not pay him what he asks first.*

That is the only useful thing I own.

The book.

I have opened the back page 200 times in 6 years and there has been nothing next to that name since Farvardin 1406.

I have put something in it. It is not a number.

I have written: **paid.**

Not *settled*. Not *cleared*. **Paid**, which in a ledger means the other party has discharged the obligation, and it is the wrong word and I know it is the wrong word and I am leaving it.

Because the arrangement in this book was always that he owes me nothing and I owe him something I cannot price. And I have decided — sitting in a yard at 5 in the morning in Farvardin with a truck I now hold the actual licence for, because he made me put in for the test in Esfand and drove me to it and waited outside — that a debt you cannot price is not a debt.

It is just what somebody did to you.

—

Costs for the year: I will do them at Nowruz like always.

Uncle A. is walking to the shop and back every day and is furious about it, which my grandmother says is a good sign.

My grandmother has not mentioned him once since the 4th and I do not expect she will.

The chair is still there. Nobody has moved it. I do not know which of the two of them it is for now and I do not think anybody in that house knows either, and I have decided that is the point of it.

—

There is a poem my grandmother tells wrong about birds who go looking for a king.

She only remembers the duck, who will not go because he lives in the water and is therefore always clean, and she thinks it is the funniest thing she has ever heard.

I asked her last week what happens to the duck.

She said nobody ever tells you that part.

I said somebody should find out.

And she said, "Well," and gave me more rice.

GLOSSARY

Attar [at-TAAR] — Farid ud-Din Attar of Neyshabur, c. 1145-c. 1221, Persian poet and apothecary; the name means perfumer, druggist. Author of *Manteq al-Tayr*.

Aban [aa-BAAN] — The eighth month of the Iranian calendar, late October to late November.

Azar [aa-ZAR] — The ninth month, late November to late December. Dey [DEY], the tenth. Bahman [bah-MAN], the eleventh. Esfand [es-FAND], the twelfth and last. Farvardin [far-var-DEEN], the first month of the new year, beginning at the spring equinox.

Benz — In Iranian usage, any of the long-serving Mercedes trucks that have carried the country's freight for half a century; the marque has become the noun.

Manteq al-Tayr [man-TEGH ot-TAYR] — Arabic, The Speech of the Birds, known in English as The Conference of the Birds. Attar's allegorical poem of c. 1177, in which the birds of the world set out across seven valleys to find their king, the Simorgh. Each bird first offers an excuse for not going. The nightingale is in love with a rose. The owl will not leave the ruins because there is treasure buried beneath them. The hawk already sits on a king's wrist, hooded and fed by hand. And the duck cannot leave the water, because he is always in it and therefore always clean, and cannot see why he should cross a desert and be dirtied. Their guide is the hoopoe. It is taught in Iranian schools.

Nowruz [now-ROOZ] — Persian, new day. The Iranian new year, at the spring equinox; older than Islam, and the country's principal festival. Sizdah [seez-DAH], the thirteenth day of it, spent outdoors.

Panjshanbeh [panj-shan-BEH] — Persian, Thursday, literally the fifth day. The eve of the Muslim holy day, and in Iran the night families gather — and the night families visit their dead.

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

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

toman [toh-MAAN] — from the Mongolian *tūmen*, ten thousand. The unit Iranians count in, equal to ten rials. Prices are quoted in tomans and printed in rials, and everyone converts silently, forever.

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

yeki bud, yeki nabud [ye-KEE BOOD, ye-KEE na-BOOD] — Persian, there was one, there was not one. The formula that opens every Persian folk tale, corresponding to once upon a time.



*A woman of seventy-four looked at his hands for four seconds and said: you have his hands.
She was not mistaken. That was the difficulty.*

Her husband's brother walked out of this country in 1364 and sent three letters and then nothing. For forty-three years the family has held two doors open — he is dead, or he decided — and nobody has ever said the second one out loud. There is a room nobody uses and a bed nobody has taken out, and at Nowruz the number of chairs has never been reduced.

The man on the step is fifty, has no papers in any name, and has been in that border town four months because a border town is the only kind of place where nobody asks a stranger anything. He does not correct her. He takes his shoes off and goes in.

There is no uniform this time and no institution. A family is not an institution — it is a story that a number of people have agreed to, and it has never once been audited. Thirty people adjust, and by the end of the week it has always been true.

Then a truck comes into the yard and a boy of seventeen gets down, and recognises him in about a second and a half, and says nothing at all for eleven days.

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

