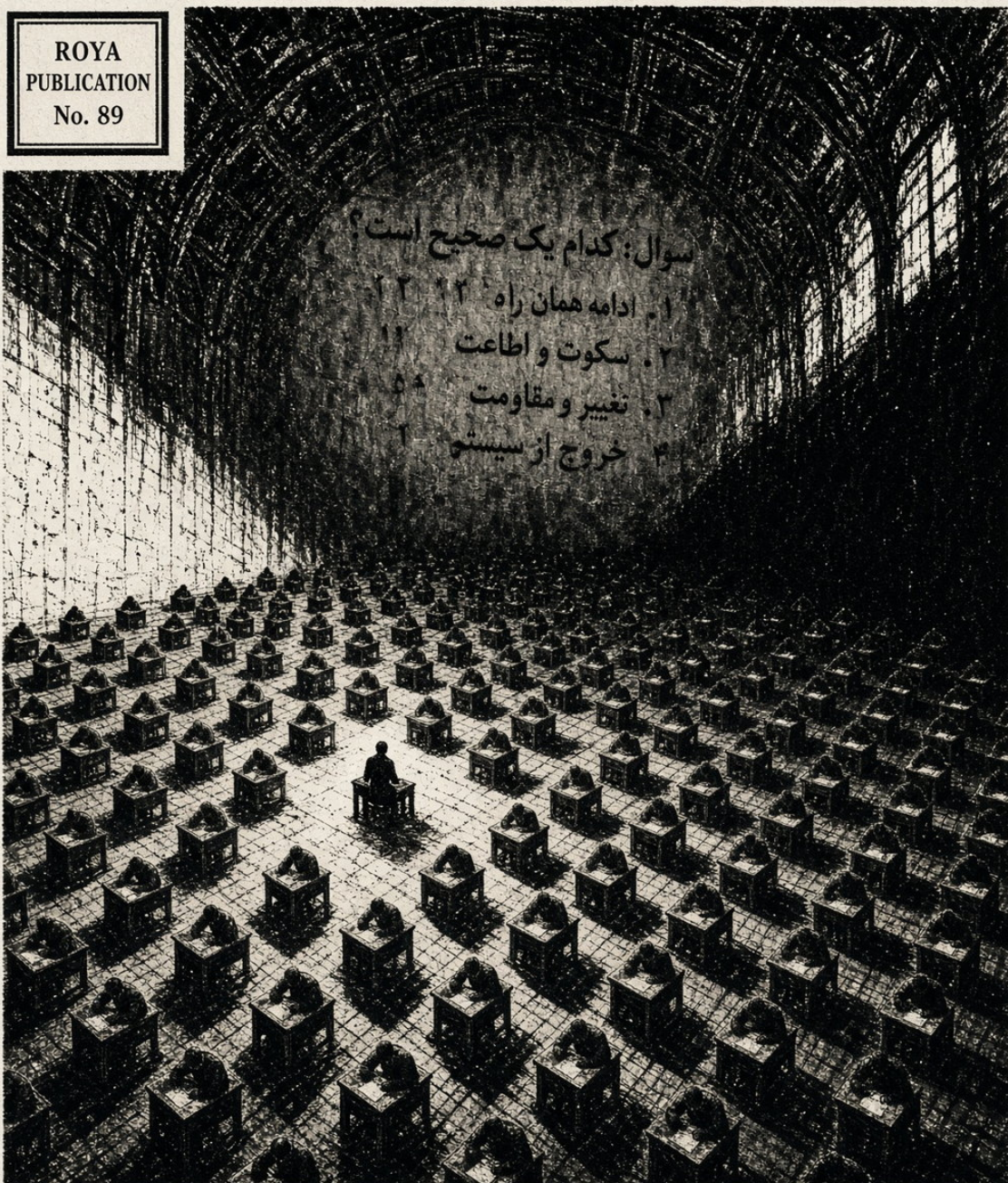




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THREE WRONG, ONE RIGHT

سه غلط، یک صحیح.

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THREE WRONG, ONE RIGHT

سه غلط، یک صحیح

CHEW Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 89

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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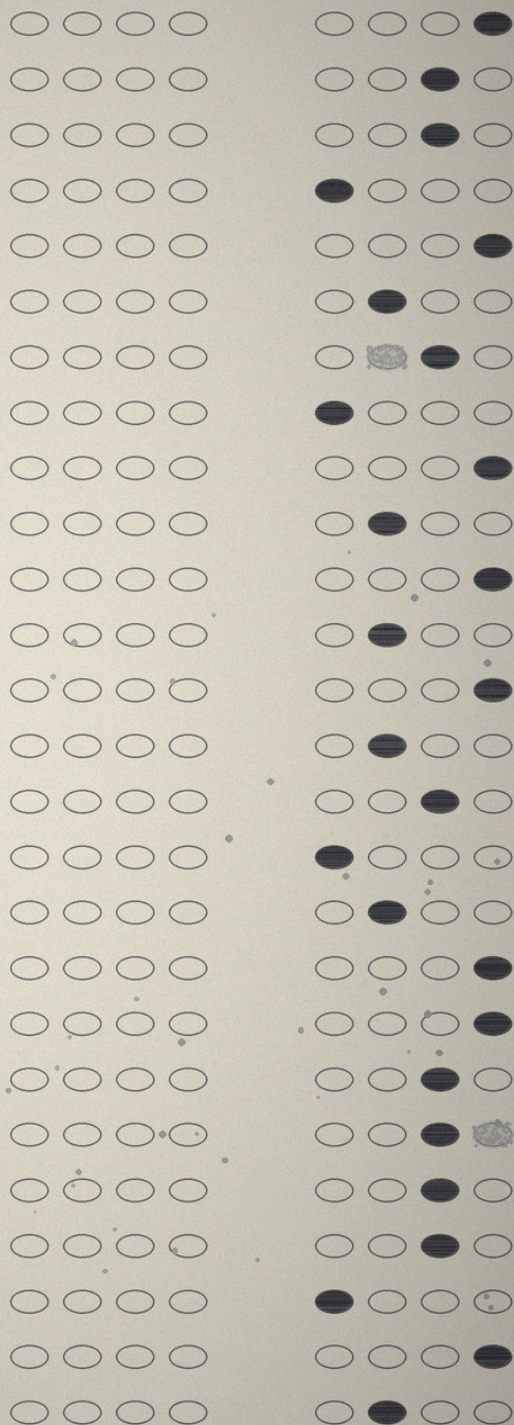
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FOR THE ONES WHO HANDED IT IN.

SYNOPSIS

Mehdi Amini is eighteen. He has slept three hours a night for six hundred nights and answered four hundred thousand practice questions, and he is not doing it because anyone made him. He is the best candidate anybody at his school has seen and he wants the room to say so.

His mother teaches the first grade and has taught nine hundred children in that country to look at a shape and make a sound. His father teaches physics and has done for twenty-nine years, and for eleven of those he has also marked konkoor practice papers at night, at a rate per paper, for an institute whose course costs more in one month than he earns in four. He marks the correct ones with a tick and the wrong ones with a short diagonal, and then he subtracts, because the wrong ones take something back.

The examination has a rule and it is printed on the front of the booklet. A correct answer scores. A wrong answer takes back part of a correct one. A blank costs nothing at all. Two years teach a seventeen-year-old, arithmetically and without anyone ever saying it, that being wrong is more expensive than being silent — and his father's advice is six words long and he only ever means it about the test.

Three Wrong, One Right is told in forty-nine entries under seventeen four-option questions. The questions begin as biology and chemistry and physics. Nothing announces the point at which they stop being that.

Nine hundred and fifty thousand candidates sit down on one morning in Tir. One in ten will be given a place. Two desks from Mehdi, somebody finishes the general section, caps a pen, squares the booklet, and does not write again for three hours and fifty minutes — and hands it in.

Eight years later Mehdi is asked to write an account of how he did it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is for the ones who are doing it now.

Somewhere in that country tonight there is a seventeen-year-old at a desk who has been there since four in the afternoon, who will be there until two in the morning, and who will do it again tomorrow, and for six hundred nights, for a place that one in ten of them will be given, in a profession whose salary buys about half of what it bought when they were born.

They are not naive. Every one of them has done the arithmetic; it takes about four seconds and they have all done it. They go on anyway, and they do it with their bodies — the sleep, the back, the eyes, the year of a life that is simply not lived — for a future that is uncertain at its best and bleak at its most likely, and nobody has ever thanked them for it. This is the thanks. It is not much.

Hope is load-bearing. It is not decoration and it is not a mood. It is the material out of which people build a life, and it goes on working long after it has stopped being reasonable, which is the most impressive thing about human beings and also the most usable.

What this book is about is what happens when hope stops being merely unreasonable and becomes *unmeasurable* — when a person cannot say whether the thing they are destroying themselves for is worth anything at all, because there is no method for finding out, and the honest answer is *not determinable from the data given*.

The three books before this one in this series were about people inside the machine. A woman who wrote the reminders. A man who drove the crane. A judge who applied the code exactly and was the most scrupulous person in his building. Every one of them was correct. Every one of them was a working part. Not one of them broke anything, and that was the point of them.

This book asks the same question from underneath, from a boy who has not yet become anything, and I want to say plainly that I do not know the answer and that the book does not contain one.

Is it better to stay silent — to be a working part, and be right, and be safe, and be nothing? Or to answer, and be wrong, and pay for it, and change nothing that can be measured?

The examination has a rule. A correct answer scores. A wrong answer takes back part of a correct one. A blank costs nothing at all, *because there is no box for it on the sheet* — and there being no box is not the same as there being no cost.

So the last question is not in the book, and it is not mine.

18. You have read the account. Is it better to answer wrongly, or not to answer at all?

1) to answer wrongly 2) not to answer 3) they are equivalent 4) not determinable from the data given

Mark one. Nobody is collecting it.

A short note on what is true. The examination works as described. The economic figures behind the household in this book — inflation, food prices, the rial, the minimum wage against a basic basket, the poverty line, rents — are taken from the Statistical Centre of Iran, the Central Bank, the IMF, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the Iranian Labour News Agency and Iran Human Rights Monitor, each of which is attributed rather than averaged, and this book endorses no figure of its own for anything. The distribution of the top places, which is the hardest fact in it, is published: of one recent year's highest scorers, roughly four in five came from the state's selective schools and none at all from ordinary state schools, and over half of the top three thousand came from the wealthiest tenth of households.

What I could not verify. The penalty for a wrong answer is real, universal, and planned around by every candidate in that country; there is an entire small industry of calculators and guides for it. I could not confirm the exact fraction against the body that sets the paper. The title states it in the form the candidates themselves use. If it should be four wrong rather than three, one calculation in one entry changes and nothing else in the book does.

What is invented. All of it. The family, the friend, the institute, the editor, the item, the four hundred and six, and the one two desks

over. No person in this book is a real person and no examination in it is a real examination.

Chew Z

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I. THE GENERAL SECTION

1.

1. In the couplet below, the poet compares the beloved's absence to:

1) a lamp 2) a debt 3) winter 4) a door

My mother taught me to read in a room with forty other children in it, and thirty-eight of them called her *khānom* [KHAA-nom] — madam, which is what a class calls a woman who teaches it — and I called her *khānom* as well, because she asked me to, on the first morning, before we left the house.

She teaches the first grade. She has taught it for twenty-two years. That means she has taught somewhere over nine hundred people in this country to look at a shape and make a sound, and she does not think of that as anything, and I did not think of it as anything either until much later.

What I thought about, at six, was that she was very slow. She would put one letter on the board and leave it there for the whole morning. Just the one. And the other children would still be looking at it at noon and I would have gone somewhere else in my head an hour before, and I was proud of that, and the pride was the first bad thing that happened to me.

There is a photograph of that year. I am at the front because I was small, and I am the only one not looking at the camera, and she is standing at the side of the frame with her hands folded, which is how she stands.

I was ashamed of her in the corridor. I want that written down early so that nothing later reads as a surprise. When the other mothers came at the end of the day they were mothers, and mine was staff, and she had chalk on her sleeve, always, on the right sleeve, and I knew which sleeve before I saw her.

I was ashamed of being ashamed too. That came about a week after the first thing and it has never once left.

My father would have had a word for that, and the word would have been a physics word.

2.

My father teaches physics at a state school four streets from ours and has done for what was then twenty-one years and is now twenty-nine.

His whole first term, every year, is conversion. Metres to centimetres. Kilograms to grams. Joules to whatever else a joule can be. He says the same sentence at the start of it and he has said it every Mehr of my life:

A quantity does not change when you change the unit you measure it in.

He would say it at home too, at the table, if I got something wrong on a page. Not as a lesson. As a comfort. The thing is still the thing. You have only picked it up by a different handle.

I believed that completely. I want to be fair to him: it is true, it is one of the few things in the world that is true without qualification, and he is a good teacher, and boys who are now forty stop him in the street.

It stopped being true in our house at some point that nobody can date, and he went on saying it, and neither of us noticed, and that is the entire matter as far as I am concerned.

3.

Narges was four when I was eight, which is a thing I say too often and which people find strange, and the reason I say it that way is that I have never once been able to think of her age except by subtracting.

Our house had rules and none of them was written anywhere and all of them were known. You did not begin eating before my father. You did not answer the door. You did not say a price out loud in front of a guest. You did not ask what something cost; you asked whether we were going to get it, which was a different question and got a different answer, and the difference between those two questions is most of what I learned before I was ten.

We were not strict. I want to be careful with that word because people outside use it wrongly. We were *exact*. There is a difference and the difference is the whole of my family. Strict is a person enforcing something. Exact is a house where nobody has to.

Narges broke every one of the rules by the time she was six and nothing happened to her, and I have never worked out whether that was because she was a girl, or because she was second, or because by then something in the household had already gone quiet.

4.

4. He waited ____ the corner for an hour.

1) in 2) at 3) on 4) by

They opened the account in Mordad, the year I was nine.

Both of them, both salaries, a fixed amount on the same day of every month, into a book with a green cover that lived in the drawer with the deeds. My mother wrote the date and the figure in the book by hand although the bank also printed it, because, she said, then there are two.

The word they used for it in front of me was *the account*. The word they used when they thought I was in the other room was *his*.

They kept it for eighteen years. That is not a detail I have had to check. My father can still give you the day of the month.

I do not want to say yet what it was worth at the end, because that is not how it happened. It did not happen at the end. It happened every single day for eighteen years, in an amount too small to be noticed on any of them, which is the only way a thing like that can be done to people who are paying attention.

5.

I was ten the first time money was discussed in front of me and it lasted about eleven seconds.

My father said a number. My mother said a different number. My father said *khob* [KHOB] — well, then; all right — in the voice of a man agreeing to something, and then he asked me what we had done at school, and I told him, and he listened to all of it, and asked two questions, and both questions were about the thing I had said and not about the number.

I have thought about those eleven seconds more than about almost anything else in my childhood. Not because of what was in them. Because of the speed and the completeness of the turn afterwards — the way the subject was not changed but *closed*, folded over and put down, and the way I understood without being told that I had been given a corner of something and that the corner was now finished.

I did not feel excluded. That is what people get wrong. I felt *protected*, and it was warm, and it worked, and I have been doing the same thing to other people ever since.

Two years after that a room decided something about me for the first time, and everybody in my family was relieved, and none of us understood what had been started.

6.

The Sampad [sam-PAAD] entrance is in the winter of the fifth grade and it takes ninety minutes and it is the first time in your life that a room decides something about you.

I passed it. I passed it comfortably, which I did not know at the time and which I only learned four years later from a teacher who should not have told me.

Here is what I remember, and it is not the exam. It is my father in the corridor afterwards, standing with the other fathers, not talking to them, because he does not talk to people he does not know, holding my coat over his arm the whole time although it was cold and he could have worn it.

And it is my mother, that evening, saying to somebody on the telephone: *he did it himself*.

That is the last unambiguous good thing that happens to my family in this account. Everything after it is either a good thing with something in it, or a thing that looked good at the time. I am putting it here so that anybody who wants to stop reading can stop reading here.

7.

7. An act performed for the sake of being seen is:

1) rewarded 2) not rewarded 3) rewarded in part 4) rewarded if it benefits another

Sampad is a state school. I want to say that clearly because of what it becomes later in this account. It costs nothing. That is the point of it. It was built to find boys like me in houses like mine and it does, and it did, and I am the proof.

But there is a gate outside it in the afternoon and there are cars at the gate.

Not all of them. Perhaps a third. And in the first month I noticed the cars, and in the second month I noticed which boys got into them, and in the third month I noticed that the boys who got into them had all been to the same two or three places over the summer, and by the end of the first year I had stopped saying which street I lived on.

Nobody made me stop. That is worth putting down. Nobody in that school was ever unkind to me about it, not once in six years. *I worked it out on my own and I did it to myself*, the way you learn any rule that nobody says out loud, and I was eleven, and I was good at exactly this kind of learning, and it is the thing I have always been best at.

8.

Sohrab arrived in the second year and his name was the loudest thing about him.

In a class of Mehdis and Mohammads and Amirhosseins there was a Sohrab, and everybody knew what that meant, and what it meant was a family that had chosen a name out of the *Shāhnāme* [shaah-NAA-meh] rather than out of the mosque, and nobody said anything about it and everybody knew.

His family had money then. Not the car-at-the-gate kind. The other kind: his father owned something, some small manufacturing thing with about forty people in it, and Sohrab was careless in a way I had never seen anybody be careless. He would leave a pen. Just leave it, on the desk, and walk out, and not think about it again.

I found that thrilling. I have never been able to explain it properly to anybody. It was not the pen. It was that there existed a way of being in the world in which a pen was not a thing you counted.

We were friends within a fortnight and we stayed friends for the whole of it, and he is the only person in this account who ever asked me a question I could not answer.

9.

In the winter of the fourth year Sohrab's father's business went.

Nobody used a word for it. Not *bankrupt*, not *closed*, not *failed*. What happened was that Sohrab stopped bringing lunch, and then about a month later he started bringing lunch again but it was bread and cheese, and then in the spring he was not in school for nine days and when he came back nobody asked.

I asked. Once, badly, in the yard, and he said, *my father sold the machines*, and then he said, *they were not worth what he paid for them*, and then he said, *nothing is*, and he laughed, and it was the first time I heard him say a thing like that and it would not be the last.

Nobody explained any of it to me. I had to watch it happen to somebody else first.

I did not understand it. I understood the words. I want to be precise about which part I did not understand, because it matters later: I did not understand that a thing could be worth one amount when

you bought it and a smaller amount when you sold it *without anything having happened to the thing*. My father had taught me that a quantity does not change when you change the unit. Nobody had told me that the unit itself could go.

10.

10. If the price rises and the wage does not, then the household:

1) buys less 2) earns less 3) saves less 4) all of the above

The meat went first, and it went so slowly that I cannot give you a month.

It was not that there was no meat. It was that there was meat on Friday, and then meat on Friday and it was chicken, and then chicken on Friday and something else on the other days that had the taste of meat in it without meat being in it, and my mother is a very good cook and for a long time I genuinely did not notice.

Then it was rice and what she called *the sauce*, and the sauce had a name once.

She did the arithmetic out loud exactly once. I was fifteen. She was at the table with the book with the green cover and a pencil and the electricity bill, and she said a figure, and then she said what it had been, and then she said, *that is in one year*, and my father said, *Zahra*, and she stopped.

She never did it out loud again in my hearing and she has done it every month since.

11.

The papers came into the house in the autumn of 1394 and they came in a cardboard box tied with string.

Four hundred practice papers from an institute across the city, to be marked at a rate per paper, by hand, in red, and returned within four days. My father took them because a colleague had dropped it and there was nobody else, and because it was *temporary*, and I

know it was temporary because he said so, at the table, on the first evening, in the tone of a man explaining a thing that requires no explanation.

That was eleven years ago. The rate has not changed since 1399.

He does them after dinner at the same table, with a ruler, and he is fast, and he is not fast in a careless way — he is fast the way a man is fast at a thing he has done a hundred thousand times. He marks the correct ones with a tick. He marks the wrong ones with a short diagonal. And then at the foot of the sheet he does the arithmetic, and the arithmetic is that the wrong ones *take something back*, and he writes the figure in a box, and he moves the sheet to the left-hand pile, and he takes the next one.

The boys whose papers those are pay more for one month of that institute than my father earns in four.

He has never said that. I worked it out myself when I was seventeen, in about four seconds, with a poster in a stairwell, and I have never told him that I know.

12.

We decided in one sentence.

It was Ordibehesht, I was sixteen, and there had been no conversation before it that I was part of, which means there had been conversations. My father put down his glass and said, *experimental sciences* — meaning the konkoor [kon-KOOR], meaning the two years, meaning all of it — not as a question, and my mother said nothing at all, and I said, *yes*, and Narges, who was twelve and had not been asked anything, said, *he'll be twenty when he finishes*, which was wrong by two years and which nobody corrected.

And that was it. That is how the next two years of my life and the whole of the money were settled: nine words at a table, and a girl doing arithmetic in her head and getting it wrong, and nobody saying the thing that everybody was thinking, which was that if it did not work there was nothing behind it.

I want to be honest about my own part. *I was not pushed*. There is a version of this account, and it is the version people expect, in which a boy is bent over a desk by his parents' hopes and holds it against them afterwards. That is not what happened and I will not write it.

I wanted it. I was better at it than anybody I had ever met and I wanted the room to say so.

The two years started the next morning and I have a note of the date because I started counting almost immediately, and I did not decide to count. It is simply that on the first night I knew how many hours I had slept, and on the second night I knew it again, and by the end of the week the number had become a thing that existed.

II. THE SPECIALIST SECTION

13.

13. During meiosis, crossing over occurs in:

1) prophase I 2) metaphase I 3) prophase II 4) anaphase II

Night one. Three hours and forty minutes.

I did not intend to write that down. I wrote it in the corner of a page of biology because I wanted to know whether it was enough, and the next night I wrote three-ten because I wanted to compare, and by the end of that first week there was a column of numbers in the margin of a notebook that had nothing to do with what the notebook was for.

Six hundred nights. I can give you the total for any of them. I can give you the total for the whole thing, which is a number I am not going to put in here, because it is the kind of number that makes a person say *that cannot be right*, and then they stop thinking about the two years and start thinking about the arithmetic, and the arithmetic is not the point.

Here is what nobody tells you about the beginning. *It is not hard at the beginning*. It is the best you have ever felt. You are seventeen and you have discovered that you can simply decide a thing and then do it, hour after hour, and the doing of it is like running downhill, and every question you get right is a small clean sound in your chest.

That lasts about five weeks.

14.

The poster was in the stairwell of the institute on Karim Khan, on the half-landing where you turn, at the height of a boy's face, which is not an accident.

It said the number of people who had registered that year. Nine hundred and fifty-seven thousand, seven hundred and ninety-eight. And beneath it, smaller, the number of places in the state universities, and beneath that, in the largest type on the sheet, the ratio, which was one in ten and which was printed in a way that made the *one* very small.

I have thought since about who designs a poster like that. Somebody was paid to make the ratio frightening. It was not a warning. It was a shop window, and the thing being sold was the difference between you and the nine.

I stood on that half-landing for a while. Then I went up and sat the free trial class, which is a sales meeting with a whiteboard in it, and at the end of it a man with a very good voice told forty of us what the course cost per month in toman [to-MAAN], and I did the other arithmetic, the one about my father, and got the answer in about four seconds.

I did not tell anybody. I went home and worked until two and I was faster that night than I had been.

15.

Sohrab asked me in Aban, on a bench, with his coat on, in a tone that had nothing in it.

He said: what is it for?

I said something about medicine. He said, no, I know what you want to be, I mean *what is it for*. And then he laid it out, and he laid it out well, because he is cleverer than me and always was and the only reason anybody thinks otherwise is that I have a rank and he does not.

He said: your father has taught for twenty-one years and cannot afford the course that marks the papers he marks. He said: my father built a thing with forty people in it and it went, and it did not go because he was stupid, it went because the money stopped being money. He said: so you will do this for two years and then six years more, and at the end of it you will be a doctor in a country where a doctor's salary buys what a clerk's salary bought when we were born. And then he said the part I could not answer.

He said: *who is it for*?

I said, for my mother.

He said, that is not an answer, that is a person.

I have had eight years and I still do not have it. I have said, since, in rooms where I was paid to say things, that a young man works because work is the only thing he controls. That is a good sentence and I have used it more than once and it is not an answer either.

16.

He stopped in Azar and there was no scene.

He was not there one Sunday. Then he was there on the Monday and did no work in the class and was pleasant about it. Then he was not there for a week, and then he came in twice more, and then that was the end of Sohrab being a person who was studying, and I could not tell you the last day.

That is how it goes. People outside think somebody announces it. Nobody announces it. What happens is that the pile of things you have not done gets past a certain height and then it is not a pile any more, it is a wall, and the boy stops walking towards the wall, and everybody in the room understands and nobody says anything, because the thing he has stopped doing is the thing the rest of us are still doing, and to say anything about it out loud would be to admit that stopping is available.

It is available. That is the fact underneath the whole year. Every morning, nine hundred and fifty thousand of us got up and did it again, and every single one of us could simply not have.

I was angry with him for about a week. I have thought a great deal since about what I was angry about and I know the answer now and I did not then.

And then the year went on being the year, and the thing that changed next did not change in me at all. It changed in the kitchen.

17.

17. A household's rent rises by 40 per cent. Its income rises by 20 per cent. Its rent as a share of income:

1) falls 2) is unchanged 3) rises 4) cannot be determined

The rent went up in Dey and my mother did the sum at the table.

She did not do it out loud this time. She did it on the back of an envelope with the pencil she keeps in the book with the green cover, and she did it twice, which she does when she does not like an answer, and then she put the pencil down and looked at it for a while.

My father said, khob.

She said, no, look. And she turned the envelope round.

He looked at it for what I remember as a long time and was probably four seconds, and then he said the thing he says, which is not *it will be all right*, because he has never in his life said that to anybody. He said: *we will find it*. Which is different. It is a statement about effort and not about outcome and he has never once broken it.

They found it. They found it out of the account, which was the first time, and my mother wrote the withdrawal in the book by hand as well as the bank printing it, because then there are two.

I was in the doorway. Neither of them knew. I went back to my room and did ninety questions and got eighty-one of them right, and I remember the eighty-one and I do not remember what I felt, and I have tried.

That is the first of the three doorways in this account. I did not know there would be three.

18.

He came round in Bahman with a carrier bag.

In it: two booklets from the institute on Karim Khan, a mock paper from a different institute with the answer key still stapled to it, and a photocopy of something with another boy's name Tipp-Exed out of

the header, badly, so you could still read it if you turned it to the light.

I said, where did you get these.

He said, I am writing them.

He was seventeen. What he was doing was piecework — items, to order, in the house style, at a rate per item, for an institute that did not put anybody's name on anything. He had given up sitting the exam and had gone and got a job *inside* it, and when I understood that I laughed, and he did not, and I have thought about the difference between those two responses more or less continuously since.

He brought me a bag like that every few weeks for two years and he never once let me give him anything for it.

My rank is made partly out of what was in those bags. I am going to say that here, once, in the place where it happened, and then I am going to say it once more much later, and that will be all, because it is not a thing you can say repeatedly without it turning into a performance of saying it.

19.

Somewhere in Esfand of that year I noticed that my mother had four options.

She came in with tea and stood in the door and said, are you going to sleep, and in the fraction of a second before I answered I saw the four of them laid out the way they are laid out on a page: yes; soon; I have an hour left; and a fourth one that was not words, that was just the shape where the fourth one goes.

I picked the third. She went away.

It did not frighten me. That is the part I have never been able to make anybody understand. It was not a symptom and it did not feel like one; it felt like *competence*. I had spent two thousand hours training a machine in my head to receive a stem and produce four options and eliminate three, and the machine had got good, and then it had got general, and I did not think of it as a thing that had

happened to me any more than a man who has laid bricks for a year thinks of his hands as a thing that has happened to him.

I never told anybody. Not because I was hiding it. Because there was nothing to tell. What would the sentence have been.

20.

Night three hundred. Two hours fifty.

I want to try to write what it is like, because everybody thinks they know and what they know is the wrong thing. They think it is exhaustion. It is not exhaustion. Exhaustion is a thing with a bottom to it, and you hit the bottom and you sleep and you come back up.

This has no bottom. What happens at about the two hundredth night is that the tiredness stops being an event and becomes the weather. There is no moment of being tired because there is no moment of not being tired to compare it against. You are simply a person who is slightly to the left of himself, all the time, and the world arrives about a third of a second late and slightly too bright at the edges, and you get used to it in the way you get used to a noise.

And here is the thing nobody will print in a booklet. *I was better in it.* Not on the third day — on the third day you are ruined. On the two hundredth day something has reorganised and you can hold six things at once and turn them, and the questions come apart in your hands.

There were boys in that class buying things to do to themselves what six hundred nights had done to me for free. I know what they were buying and I never took any of it and I want that written down, not because I was good, but because *I did not need to*, and that is the crueller sentence and it is the true one.

While that was happening to me upstairs, the arithmetic downstairs was doing its own work, and it did it to my mother first.

21.

21. A household in the lowest consumption quintile spends 45 per cent of consumption on food; the highest spends 26 per cent. The difference is best described as:

1) a preference 2) a shortage 3) an income effect 4) a measurement error

My mother stopped eating with us in the spring.

Not all at once and not announced. She would put everything on the table and then be at the counter, and when you said, come and sit, she would say, I have eaten, and she would say it at the same point every time — after the plates were down and before anybody had started — so that it arrived as part of the serving and not as a statement.

My father knew. I have no doubt that my father knew from the first week. He never once challenged it in front of us, and I have decided that this was not weakness but a kind of terrible courtesy, and I may be wrong, and I have never asked him.

Narges challenged it. She was thirteen. She said, *maman* [maa-MAAN] — mother — *you have not eaten*, flatly, in the middle of a Thursday, in front of everybody, and there was a silence of a length I have never experienced before or since, and then my mother sat down and ate, and did not eat with us again for a month afterwards.

I said nothing on that Thursday. I was seventeen and I was hungry and there was a paper in the morning.

22.

There was a boy in my year who was driven to school.

He was not unkind. I need to put that down because of what people want this to be. He was pleasant, he was funny in a mild way, he lent things without being asked and without noticing, and I do not think there was one afternoon in six years when he was anything other than decent to me.

On the practice papers I beat him by fourteen marks and it was not close and it was never once close.

He is a doctor now. I looked him up two years ago on a bad evening, which I do not do often, and I found him immediately because he has a page with his hours on it.

I do not begrudge him. I have gone round this a great many times and I have got to the place where I can say honestly that I do not begrudge him, and where I also know that the sentence *he was not as good as me* is true, and that both of those can sit in the same head at the same time and neither one moves.

23.

Two in the morning, in Ordibehesht, with the papers.

I had come out for water. He had the box open and about sixty done and the rest to do, and he had his glasses pushed up on his head, and he did not hear me because he does not hear anything when he is marking.

I stood in the doorway for I would say five minutes and I watched him do six papers.

He does not read them. I had never understood that before. He is not reading a boy's answers and considering them; he has a card with the key on it and he goes down the column with the ruler, and his hand does a tick or a short diagonal, and the diagonal is faster than the tick because it is one stroke, and you can hear which one it is from across a room. Tick, tick, slash. Slash. Tick.

And then at the foot: he counts the slashes, and he divides, and he *takes it off*. That is the whole of it. The wrong ones take back part of the right ones. He wrote the figure in the box and moved the sheet to the left and took the next one and it had taken him about fifty seconds.

He has done that four hundred thousand times.

I stood there and I understood — not in words, I want to be accurate, it arrived all at once and sideways — that the rule my father was applying with his hand at two in the morning for a rate

per paper that had not moved since 1399 *was the same rule he had been giving me as advice since I was six*. Do not guess. If you do not know, leave it. A wrong one costs you. A blank costs you nothing.

He has been taking his own advice for twenty-nine years. He has left every question blank that could have cost him anything, and he has been correct every single time, and he is fifty-four and marks papers until two in the morning for boys whose fathers he will never meet.

I did not get the water. I went back to my room and I did not work and I did not sleep either, and in the morning I said nothing, and he said nothing, because there was nothing to say, and because we are exact.

24.

Narges did her homework at the kitchen table for two years because my room was not to be disturbed.

She was twelve when it started. She is the sharper of us. I have said that to three people in my life and two of them thought I was being modest.

She never once complained about the room. What she did instead was learn the whole shape of it from outside — the hours, the temper, the way my mother walked past my door, the way a household reorganises itself around one member without a single instruction being issued — and she watched all of it from a kitchen chair with her own books open, for two years, and said nothing.

And then she said one thing, in Tir, about a week before, and I did not understand it and I have never forgotten it. She said: *when it is finished, will you still be like this?*

I said, like what.

She said, nothing. Never mind. And she went back to her book, and she was fourteen, and she was the only person in that house who asked me a question about myself in two years.

25.

25. A candidate has spent 5,400 hours in preparation. The value of the 5,400 hours is:

1) known in advance 2) known afterwards 3) known to others 4) not determinable

Night five hundred and eighty. Two hours ten.

The last week is not work. Everybody says this and it is true and it is the strangest week of a person's life. There is nothing left to learn and you cannot learn anything new in seven days and every teacher tells you so, so what you do instead is *maintain*, which means going over things you already know in order to remain the person who knows them, and it is like carrying a full glass across a room for six days.

I was not frightened. I want that on the record because of what happens on the day. In that last week I was calm in a way that I have not been since, and I slept badly and did not mind, and I sat in the room with the papers around me and I was — and I know how this reads — I was *content*.

I had done the thing. Whatever came, I had done the thing, and nobody could take the six hundred nights back out of me, and I was eighteen and I believed that completely.

My mother ironed something on the Thursday. My father came home on the Wednesday with a new pen, which is the single most sentimental act of his life, and put it on my desk without a word and left the room before I could say anything.

I still have it.

III. THE SESSION

26.

26. A candidate has not slept. The effect on performance is:

1) negative 2) negligible 3) positive 4) not determinable

03:40.

I did not sleep. Not badly — not at all. I lay on my back and did not sleep and at some point stopped pretending to and lay there with my eyes open and the ceiling going grey.

At twenty past three I heard my mother in the kitchen. She had been up before me or she had not gone down either, and I have never asked which.

The argument was about the bag. She had made bread and cheese and cucumber and put in two boiled eggs and a bottle of water frozen the night before so it would still be cold at eleven, and a second bottle not frozen, and a piece of sugar wrapped in paper, and I said it was too much and she said take it, and I said they will not let me take it in, and she said take it as far as the door.

That was the whole argument and it lasted a minute and I lost it.

She had also ironed the shirt. She had ironed it on the Thursday and it had been hanging on the back of the door for three days with a cloth over the shoulder so it would not get dusty, and at four in the morning she took the cloth off it and gave it to me and did not say anything, and I put it on in a cold room.

27.

04:55.

My father had the car started at half past four because of the traffic, which begins at five and which everybody in that city knows about and plans for and is defeated by anyway.

Narges was not supposed to come. There had been a conversation about it on the Thursday in which it was established that there was no reason for her to come, that it would be five hours in a car park in Tir, that she had her own things, and she had agreed, and at twenty to five she was standing at the door in her shoes.

Nobody said anything. My father opened the back door and she got in.

My mother sat in the front with the bag on her knees, holding it with both hands the way you hold something on a bus.

Nobody spoke for the first twenty minutes. My sister put her head against the window. I sat behind my father and looked at the back of his neck, and I noticed that he had cut his hair, and I worked out that he had gone on the Wednesday, before he bought the pen, and that he had done it so that he would look correct at the gate of a building he was not going to be allowed into.

28.

05:40.

Somewhere on the expressway my father said it.

He had been building up to it for a quarter of an hour, and I knew that he was building up to it, because his hands changed on the wheel, and my mother knew too, and she looked out of the side window with great concentration at nothing in order to give him the room.

He said: whatever happens today, nothing changes in this house.

I said, I know.

He said: I mean it. Nothing changes. You understand.

And I said, yes, and looked out of the window, and what I felt was not gratitude. *What I felt was the weight of it arriving.* Because a man does not say *nothing changes* unless something is capable of changing, and until that sentence I had been a boy going to sit an examination, and after it I was a boy carrying the whole of a family's eighteen years in a bag with two boiled eggs in it.

He meant it kindly. He meant it more kindly than anything he has ever said to me. It was the worst thing anybody said to me that day and he could not possibly have known.

Then he said nothing else for forty minutes and neither did I, and my sister was asleep or was pretending, and my mother looked out of the window at nothing all the way there.

29.

06:20.

You do not see the crowd from the road. You see the buses.

They come from every direction into one set of streets, and the traffic stops being traffic and becomes a slow parade of white minibuses and green city buses and taxis with four in the back, and then everybody gets out at once, all of them at once, and the pavement is not a pavement any more.

There is no shouting. That is the thing about it. I had expected noise and there was almost none. Nine hundred and fifty thousand people did this that morning across that country and I would say a thousand of them were in that street, and the sound of a thousand people going to sit an examination is a soft, dry, enormous rustling and almost nothing else.

The fence is what I remember. There is a fence round the yard, and the candidates go in through the gate and the families do not, and so the families stand along the fence, and they stand there for four and a half hours in Tir because there is nowhere else to be and because leaving would be a thing they would have to explain to themselves afterwards.

I turned round at the gate. I should not have. My mother had her hand up, not waving — up, flat, palm towards me, which is a thing she does and which means nothing except *I am here*. And my father was standing behind her with his hands at his sides, and Narges was on the other side of my mother with her face doing something complicated, and there were four hundred other people along that fence doing exactly the same thing, and they all looked identical, and I understood for about a second and a half that we were all completely interchangeable.

Then I went in.

30.

06:50.

The search is at the door of the hall and it is done by two men at a table with a plastic tray each.

You empty the pencil case onto the tray. That is the instruction and it is given about nine hundred times an hour by men whose voices have gone. Pencils, out. Eraser, out. Sharpener, out — and the sharpener goes back in your bag, not into the hall, because a sharpener has a blade in it. The pen my father bought me was allowed. The eraser was cut in half with a blade in front of me and half of it given back, and I have never understood that and never asked, and I still do not know whether it was a rule or a man.

Ahead of me in the queue there was a boy with a problem about a document.

I did not hear it. I saw the shape of it: the boy holding out a card, and the man at the table looking at it and then at a list and then at the card, and then calling somebody, and the somebody coming and doing the same three things in the same order, and then a hand on the boy's shoulder, turning him, not roughly, and the boy going back out through the door he had come in by.

Nobody in that queue said anything. I did not say anything. I moved up one place, which is what you do, and I got to the table and emptied my pencil case onto the tray, and by the time I sat down I had stopped thinking about him.

I have thought about him a great deal since. He would be twenty-six now.

And then you are through the door, and the building takes over, and nothing that happens next is anything you decide.

31.

31. In a room of eight hundred people, the number who are alone is:

1) none 2) one 3) eight hundred 4) not determinable

07:20.

The hall is a hall in the way that a canyon is a shape. It was built for something else and every year they put desks in it.

Single desks, one metre of floor around each of them, in a grid, running away from you in both directions until they stop being desks and become a texture. Eight hundred in that hall, I was told afterwards; I did not count and I do not think anybody has.

The heat at twenty past seven in Tir is not yet the heat. It is the promise of it. The ceiling is very high, and high rooms do not cool, they store, and by nine that ceiling would be giving back everything it had taken in the day before.

There are fans. They are on brackets high up on the two long walls, and they turn, and they do not reach the back four rows, and everybody who has done this before knows which rows those are and nobody sitting in them knows until about ten.

I was in the fifth row from the back on the left, three from the aisle.

Two desks over from me on the same row there was somebody left-handed, writing already, before the paper had been given out — writing on the desk, or on a hand, or on nothing, the way people do. And a green pen, which is not permitted. It says on the card, and it says on the wall, and it says in the letter they send you: black or blue only.

Nobody stopped him. He had it out on the desk in front of the invigilator twice before eight o'clock and nobody stopped him, and I was eighteen and I found that outrageous, and it is the only thing I felt about him for the first half hour.

32.

07:45.

The booklet comes face down and you do not turn it. There are four minutes of everybody in the room sitting behind a face-down booklet, and that is the longest four minutes I have ever sat through.

Then the bell, and eight hundred people turn a page at once, and the sound of that is like a single wave hitting a single beach, and then it is completely silent.

Persian first. I was fine. I was better than fine — the first fifteen went past like water, and there is a specific feeling when a paper opens easily under you, and it is close to joy, and I had it for about eleven minutes.

Arabic. Fine. Religious studies, fine. English, easy.

And then at about ten past eight I looked up for the first time, because you do look up, everybody looks up, and the one two desks over had turned his page before me.

He was ahead. Not by a little. I could see the block of the booklet under his hand and where his hand was on it and it was *ahead of mine*, and he was going fast, and he was going fast in the way that only happens when it is not costing anything.

And what I felt — I am going to write it down exactly because it is the last uncomplicated thing I felt that day — was annoyance.

33.

08:25.

He stopped.

There was nothing to it. I have gone over it perhaps two hundred times and there is nothing in it to find. He came to the end of a page. He capped the pen — I heard it, or I have decided since that I heard it, and I am not sure, and I have stopped trying to be sure. He squared the booklet with the edge of the desk with two hands, the way you square a thing you are giving to somebody.

And then he put his hands flat on the desk on either side of it and he sat up.

That is all. He did not put his head down. He did not cry, then or at any point in the next three hours and fifty minutes, and I checked, and I am ashamed of how often I checked. He did not look at anybody. He sat upright with his hands flat and his eyes open, facing the front of a room with nothing at the front of it, and he stayed exactly like that.

I thought he was ill. That is what I thought at half past eight, and I thought about putting my hand up, and I did not, because I had a paper in front of me and because putting your hand up in that hall means an invigilator comes and stands over your desk.

You cannot leave. That is the part people outside do not know. There is no leaving early. You are in that room until the end whatever you do in it, and so a person who has finished with the examination at twenty-five past eight has three hours and fifty minutes of sitting in a chair in front of the thing they have finished with.

I did not understand what I was looking at. I want to be exact about that: I did not understand any part of what I was looking at, on that morning, at eighteen. It took eight years and a job.

And I went back to my own paper, because that is what you do, and forty-five minutes later the paper stopped being easy.

34.

34. A candidate does not know the answer. Answering incorrectly costs a third of a correct answer. Leaving the item blank costs nothing. The candidate should:

1) answer 2) leave it 3) answer if two options can be eliminated 4) it does not matter

09:10.

Item sixty-one, biology, and I could not do it.

I need to explain what that means, because it had not happened. In two years and four hundred thousand questions there had been

questions I did slowly and questions I did wrongly, and there had not been one that simply stood there.

I read it three times. On the third time I understood that reading it again was not going to do anything and that I was now spending the only thing I actually had.

So I did the arithmetic, and this is the ninety seconds that the whole of my life since has come out of, and it went like this.

If I answer and I am right, I gain one. If I answer and I am wrong, I lose a third. Can I eliminate any of them? I could not eliminate one. So it is one in four, and answering is worth — and I did it, in my head, at twenty past nine in a hall at thirty-four degrees — it is worth a quarter of a mark against a three-quarters chance of losing a third of a mark, and a quarter is three-quarters of a third, and so it comes to nothing. It is nothing either way. It is *exactly* nothing, and it is exactly nothing on every question in the paper, which is the joke, and I did not see the joke for eight years.

And underneath the arithmetic, arriving with it, in my father's voice, at the speed those things arrive: *if you don't know, leave it.*

I left it.

It was the correct decision. I want that in here in the plainest words I have. There is no version of that ninety seconds in which a better candidate does something else. I did what the paper was built to make me do, I did it well, and I have never once been able to feel anything about it except that I would like the ninety seconds back.

35.

09:55.

By ten it was thirty-six degrees in that hall and the fans were doing what fans do, which is move hot air from one place to another place.

Chemistry. Sweat on the heel of the hand, which is the real problem — not the discomfort, the fact that you cannot erase where you have sweated. The paper goes soft and grey and the rubber takes the surface off it and you have to decide, on a page you

cannot replace, whether to leave a wrong mark visible or to make a hole.

Somebody two rows up was crying without any noise. It happens. I did not look for long.

At about five to ten an invigilator went down our row and stopped at his desk.

He stood there for a moment. Then he bent slightly and said something, and it was short, four or five words, and the one two desks over answered him — I saw the head move, and I saw that whatever he said was also short, and I saw that it was said *politely*, without heat, the way you answer a man who is doing his job.

And the invigilator straightened up and stood there for another second or two, and then he went on down the row and did not come back.

I have constructed that exchange in four different ways over eight years. I have him asking whether the boy is unwell. I have him telling him to continue. I have him asking whether he understands that there is time remaining. And I have a fourth one, which is the one I believe on bad nights, in which the invigilator asked nothing at all and simply said *there is another two hours*, and the boy said *I know*, and that was the whole of it.

I will never find out. Nobody wrote it down. It is not the kind of thing there is a box for.

36.

36.

1) 2) 3) 4)

10:45.

I do not remember the rest.

37.

12:15.

The bell. Pens down. Eight hundred people put a pen down at the same time and the sound is smaller than you expect.

They collect the answer sheets first and the booklets after, in that order, and it takes eleven minutes, and in those eleven minutes you sit at your desk with nothing in front of you and you are permitted to think about what you have done.

I could not.

I want to be careful here because this is the part that people do not believe and it is the part I most need to get exactly right. *I did not black out.* I was not unconscious and I did not fall asleep and I did not miss anything. The invigilator did not have to speak to me, my sheet was complete, and when I looked at my hands they were the hands of somebody who had been working steadily for ninety minutes.

I simply could not find it. From about a quarter to eleven to the bell there is nothing there. Not a blur — I have had blurs and this was not one. It is more like a room in a house you have lived in all your life that you cannot get to from any of the corridors.

They collected the sheet out of my hands and I let them.

Outside, past the door and past the men with the trays and out into the yard and the light, which after four and a half hours is like being hit — and the fence, and the four hundred families, all standing up at once.

Narges got to me first. She had come round the end of the fence and she was small and she got through and she reached me about six seconds before my parents did.

She looked at my face and something happened to hers.

And then my mother arrived and said *khob?* — well? — and I said *it was fine*, and Narges did not say one word, not then and not in the car and not that night, and she has never told them, and she was fourteen years old.

38.

that night.

Nobody asked me anything.

That was decided in advance. I know it was decided in advance because both of them did it, perfectly, for six hours, and my parents have never in their lives improvised anything together.

There was rice with saffron, and there was chicken, and there was a thing with walnuts in it that takes two days and which she therefore must have started on the Thursday, and there was a bottle of the good sharbat [shar-BAT] — the cordial — that comes out at Nowruz [now-ROOZ].

None of us said what it cost. All four of us knew.

My father talked about a boy at his school who had got into the naval academy. My mother talked about her sister's knee. Narges said almost nothing and ate almost nothing and kept looking at me, and every time I caught her she looked at her plate.

At about ten my father said, *khob*, and stood up, and put his hand flat on the top of my head for about a second on his way past — which he has not done since I was nine and has not done since — and went to bed.

Then my mother cleared, and I dried, and at the sink, with her back to me and her hands in the water, she said: *you did what you could.*

I said, yes.

And she said, *no, I mean it, Mehdi. You did what you could and that is the end of it and I am not going to think about it again.*

She has thought about it every day since. But she said it, and she meant to mean it, and it was the kindest sentence available to her, and I have never told her that at that moment I was not thinking about the result at all.

I was thinking about ninety minutes I could not find, and about a boy two desks over sitting up with his hands flat, and I was going to be thinking about both of those things for eight years.

IV. THE ANSWER SHEET

39.

39. A candidate is ranked in the first four hundred of nine hundred and fifty thousand. The correct description of the candidate is:

1) exceptional 2) fortunate 3) prepared 4) one of four hundred

The results come at night, on a website, and the website falls over, and everybody in that country refreshes the same page for two hours.

It came at about ten past one. My father was asleep. My mother was not. Narges was in the doorway of my room with her arms folded and had been there, on and off, since eleven.

I read the number twice and then I said it out loud, and the reason I said it out loud is that I did not believe the first reading and wanted to hear whether it survived being spoken.

My mother made a sound I had not heard before and have not heard since. She went out onto the landing and shut the door behind her, and she stood in the stairwell of that building at twenty past one in the morning and wept, in the dark, so that we would not have to watch her do it. She was quiet about it, and I could hear her anyway, and so could Narges, and neither of us moved. She came back in after about four minutes and her face was completely composed.

She said, *shall I make tea*, and made tea.

My father got up at six as usual. She had told him. He came into the kitchen and he did not embrace me — we do not — and he put out his hand and shook mine, once, the way you shake the hand of a man you have concluded something with.

Then he ate his bread and went to school and taught six lessons.

40.

I have never been able to hold it.

Everything I did between about a quarter to eleven and the bell was done well. That is not in question. It cannot be in question; it is

on a sheet, it was marked by a machine, and the machine does not care who was sitting in the chair.

But I do not have it. And a thing you cannot remember doing is a thing somebody else did, in every way that matters to the person it is supposed to belong to.

I have tested it. This is the part I have not told anybody, including the two people I have been closest to since. For about four years I would set myself questions of that kind, at night, from that year's paper, and time myself, to see whether the person who could do that was still available. He always was. *That is not the same as him having been me.*

Everybody who has ever congratulated me has congratulated a man about ninety minutes of whose life is missing. I say thank you. I have said thank you several hundred times.

There is a version of this in which I am being modest, and a version in which I am being neurotic, and both of those are more comfortable than the true one, which is simply that the best thing that has happened to me is the one thing I have never once been able to feel.

While I was failing to feel it, Sohrab was at a table somewhere writing forty items for money, and thirty-nine of them were ordinary.

41.

41. A candidate spends 5,400 hours over two years preparing for the national examination. The probability of admission to a state university is 0.1. Over the same two years, the goods that a graduate's expected monthly wage will purchase decrease by 47 per cent. The value of the 5,400 hours is:

1) positive 2) zero 3) negative 4) not determinable from the data given

In Bahman of the following year Sohrab put that into a mock paper.

I have the wording nearly right. I have had eight years to get it wrong, and I have never seen the sheet, and what I have is what he

told me across a table much later and what I have done to it since by carrying it.

Everything in it is true. The hours are the hours. The tenth is the tenth — it is on the poster in the stairwell. And the forty-seven per cent he worked out himself, from the wage and the price of food, on a piece of paper, and he checked it, because he was careful, because he was always careful.

The key he filed with it says the answer is 4. And it is. *Not determinable from the data given* is a standard option and it is, strictly, correct: you would need to know what the candidate would otherwise have done with the two years, and nobody knows that, and there is no method for finding out.

The correct answer to that question is the one that declines to answer it. That is why nothing in it was ever wrong. That is why the only thing anybody could accuse him of was tone.

It went out to something over three thousand sixteen-year-olds in eleven cities.

Four hundred and six of them chose 3.

42.

Nobody read it.

That is the thing I would ask a person to sit with for a moment, if they were going to sit with anything in this account. Nobody at that institute read Sohrab's question. Not one adult looked at those four options and thought about them.

A spreadsheet read it.

They profile the mock papers. Every institute does, and ours does, and I have run the report myself since — it is a Thursday job, it takes about forty minutes, and what it produces is a table of items against the share of candidates who chose each option. It exists to find defective items. If an item is ambiguous, or the key is wrong, or the stem has a typo in it, the distribution goes strange, and you pull the item, and that is a good and sensible system that I have used and will use again.

Somebody saw a row where the numbers were unlike any row on record. And *then* somebody read it.

There was no meeting. There was no letter. Nobody came to his house and nobody ever will, and I want that stated plainly because of what people assume when they hear that a boy wrote something and it cost him.

The work stopped coming. That is the entire mechanism. He was not on the list for the next batch, and he was not on the one after that, and when he telephoned, the man was pleasant and busy. His name went round the other institutes the way a name goes round a trade, which is to say without anybody writing anything down and without anybody being able to say afterwards that they did it.

He was eighteen. It was his family's income.

The rest of it took four years and none of it was dramatic: the move to the smaller place, and then his father and mother in one room of it, and then the work at a place with machines in it because that was the work there was, and the hand.

I was in another city for all four of them and I did not know about any of it until much later, and I was busy, and what I was busy with was leaving medicine.

43.

I went to Tehran and I read medicine for two years and four months.

I am not going to make a story out of leaving. There is no story. I started tutoring in my second year because the room cost more than we had assumed it would cost — everything cost more than we had assumed, every year, that is the whole of the arithmetic of that decade — and I was good at it immediately, and the thing about being good at it is that it is not a skill, it is a *memory*, and I had six hundred nights of it and it was still warm.

By the middle of the third year I was earning more from four evenings a week than a resident earns. Not more than a consultant. More than a resident, and a residency is seven years long.

I did the arithmetic. I did it properly, on paper, over about three weeks, the way my father would have done it, and I have the sheet somewhere. And the arithmetic said that the six hundred nights had bought me a place, and that the place would cost me eleven more years, and that at the end of the eleven years I would earn less in real terms than I was earning at twenty-one from teaching other boys how to sit the examination I had already sat.

The arithmetic was correct. I want that written down without any decoration on it. I did not fail, I was not thrown out, nothing happened to me. I checked a calculation and then I acted on it, which is the only thing anybody had ever trained me to do.

I told my parents in Mordad. My father listened to the whole of it and asked two questions and both of them were about the figures, and when I had answered them he said, *khob*.

He has never once referred to it since. Not once, in five years, and I have watched for it.

He was still marking when I told him. He is still marking now.

44.

44. A man has performed the same subtraction four hundred thousand times. The total cost of the omitted answers is recorded in:

1) the key 2) the score 3) the report 4) no place

He is sixty-three now and he still marks.

He is quicker than he was. He does about eighty an hour and the rate has not moved since 1399 and he has never asked for it to be moved, and when I offered, two years ago, in the most careful sentence I have ever constructed, he said that the arrangement was satisfactory.

He works for the institute I work for. He does not know that. It is a large company with four names and the marking is contracted through a third one, and there is no reason on earth for him to know, and I have not told him, and I am aware of what that is.

I went back for Nowruz and watched him for a while from the door of the kitchen, the way I did when I was seventeen, and it is the same. The card. The ruler. Tick, tick, slash. Slash.

And I understood something in the doorway that I had not understood in the doorway at seventeen, which is that in twenty-nine years of doing that, he has never once written down what a blank costs. He counts the ticks. He counts the slashes. He subtracts. He writes the figure in the box.

There is no box for the blanks. There is no line on the sheet for them, no column in the report, no field in the system. A boy who leaves forty items untouched and a boy who answers all of them correctly and a boy who does not sit the paper at all produce three numbers, and only two of those numbers are about anything that happened.

He has been the instrument of that rule since 1394 and its subject since 1376 and he cannot see either, because there is no box for it, and because the one thing a man cannot audit is the procedure he is inside.

45.

The paper is in two halves, and everybody knows this, and nobody thinks about it.

The first half is the general section. Persian, Arabic, religion, English. Every candidate in the country answers the same questions in that half, whatever they came to be. The boy who intends to be a surgeon and the boy who intends to teach and the one who is only there because his father filled in the form — they sit down in front of the same pages. It is the part of the examination that does not ask you what you are for. It asks whether you can read, and whether you know the words, and whether you were raised here.

The second half is the specialist section, and that is where the paper stops being a test and becomes a door. Biology, if you intend to be a doctor. Mathematics, if you intend to build. Those pages do not measure you. They sort you. Every mark you make in the

second half is you telling the country what to do with you, and once you have told it, it does that, and it does not ask again.

He answered the first half. All of it, and quickly, and I could hear the pen.

He stopped at the first page of the second.

It took me eight years to understand what that was, and I only understood it because it is now my work to know how a paper is ordered. He had not given up. Giving up looks different. I have watched two hundred children give up and they put their heads down and their hands stop being straight. He sat up. He had his hands flat on the desk for three hours and fifty minutes, the way you sit when you are being polite to somebody you have nothing further to say to.

He had answered everything that made him one of us.

He had refused everything that would have made him something.

And then he handed it in. That is the part I cannot get round. He did not tear it up. He did not walk out, and he could not have walked out, but he did not try. He let them take it and mark it and put it into the system, and somewhere in a file that no one will ever open there is a candidate with a very high score in Persian and Arabic and religion and English, and no field, and no rank, and no place, and no future assigned to him, because he did not request one.

He was ahead of me. I want that written down. He was faster than I was on the general section and I noticed it and it annoyed me, and I have thought since that he was probably the best candidate in that room, and that this is the only reason any of it means anything. *A person who could not have had it cannot refuse it.*

It is the only complete sentence anybody said in that hall.

My sister sat the same paper four years later and nobody in our house had learned anything at all.

46.

Narges sat it four years after me and did not get what she went for. She had my books, which were out of date, and she had my method, which was worse than useless to her because it was not hers, and she had two years in a household that had already spent everything it had on the first attempt and had nothing to bring to a second one except the knowledge that it could be done.

That last part is the cruellest thing our family did to her and none of us did it on purpose. I had made it look possible. I was the proof in the room. Every time she was tired there was a brother in the next province who had done it on three hours a night, and nobody ever said *you should be able to do this* — nobody would have dreamed of saying it — and it did not need saying, because I was standing there.

She placed in the six thousands. In any other decade that is a good result and a real life.

She did not cry, that I know of. She got a job in an office in Karaj that has to do with imports and told us it was interesting, and then about a year later stopped saying it was interesting, and stayed for another three years.

She never once said anything to me about it. Not one sentence, in four years. And I did not ask, because asking would have required me to have an answer ready for what she said next, and I did not have one.

47.

47. A candidate spends 5,400 hours over two years preparing for the national examination. The probability of admission to a state university is 0.1. Over the same two years, the goods that a graduate's expected monthly wage will purchase decrease by 47 per cent. The value of the 5,400 hours is:

1) positive 2) zero 3) negative 4) not determinable from the data given

I found him in Esfand, through a cousin of his who is on the internet.

We met near Hasan Abad. He was late and apologised twice, which I did not expect, and he looks fine — that is the first thing and it needs saying, because people expect a ruin and there is no ruin. He is thin. He has a good face. The hand does not close all the way and he manages it so smoothly that I did not notice for half an hour, and when I did notice he saw me notice and said *machine*, and that was the entire conversation about it.

He would not let me pay for anything except the lunch. I tried. I had prepared for it in the taxi, I had three sentences ready, and I got about four words into the first of them and he put his hand flat on the table, the good one, and said *Mehdi*, and I stopped.

I asked him if he regretted it.

He said no, and then he sat and thought about it properly, which is the thing about him that has not changed at all, and then he said the thing I have been carrying since.

He said: *you think I chose. I didn't choose. I answered.* There's a difference and I've had eight years to find it and I haven't.

I said, that is the same thing.

He said, no. Choosing is when you can see both of them. He said: I sat down to write forty items for money, and I wrote thirty-nine of them, and then I wrote that one, and I did not stop before it and I did not stop afterwards. I put the pen down and I made tea. He said, it took me eleven minutes. He said, a man who chooses something takes longer than eleven minutes.

Then he asked about my parents, and about Narges, and he remembered that she had sat it and he remembered the year, and we talked about nothing for a while, and at the end of it he said he was glad about my rank, and he meant it, and he has never once mentioned the carrier bags.

I did not tell him what I was doing.

I want that in here in its own line because it is the worst thing in this account and I am not going to bury it in a paragraph. *I sat across a table from him for two hours, in Esfand, a year before it went out, and I did not tell him.*

I told myself at the time that it was to protect him. I have had a while with that. The truth is nearer this: a man who knows is a man who could say afterwards that he knew, and I have spent my whole life not answering questions that could cost me something, and I did not answer that one either.

48.

She came to Tehran in Farvardin with a folder.

She had a place. A one-year course in Istanbul, in logistics, which is what her office work turned out to have been training her for without anybody planning it, and she had got the place herself and had told nobody until it was certain.

She needed a guarantor. That is all. A letter, a bank statement, a stamp from a notary, and a signature — mine, because I have a salary and she does not, and because there is nobody else. The deadline was the end of Khordad.

We sat in a place near my office and she pushed the folder across and I looked at it and said yes before I had finished looking at it, and I meant it, and I want to be completely clear that at no point in this was there a moment where I considered saying no. There was no such moment. It never happened.

Then she asked me the other thing.

She said: Baba [baa-BAA] — father — always said, if you don't know, leave it. She said it exactly the way he says it. Then she said: did he mean the test?

And I knew. I want that written down without any softening on it at all. *I knew the answer, I had known it since I was seventeen and stood in a doorway at two in the morning, and I did not say it.*

I said something about him being a physics teacher. I said something about that generation. I said that he had done what he could with what he had, which is true, and which is the sentence you use when you are not going to say the other one.

She looked at me for a moment. Then she said *khob*, which is his word, and put the folder back in her bag, and we talked about her flat.

The letter took eleven weeks.

There is nothing to tell about the eleven weeks. Nobody prevented it. I did not decide anything. There was a bank statement that had to be for three months and mine was for two and I had to wait for the third; and then the notary wanted the original of something; and then there was a week in Tir when we launched the spring course and I did not open my personal mail at all.

The deadline was nine weeks.

She never raised it. Not once — not that summer, not since, not at Nowruz. She has been extraordinarily kind to me about it in the specific way of never once mentioning it, and I would give a great deal for her to have shouted at me, and she is not going to, because we are exact.

She is still in Karaj. It is a good office and they think well of her.

49.

49. What is the value of the 5,400 hours?

This is the last thing and it is not what you have been reading.

I should set it out plainly, because the whole of it has been set out plainly and there is no reason to stop now.

I am employed by an educational institute. In Aban I was asked to write an account of my own preparation for the national examination, to be published under the institute's imprint and distributed without charge to candidates and their families in advance of the registration period. The brief was four hundred words of specification. It asked for the account to be *structured around exemplar items with the candidate's own commentary*, on the grounds — and this is quoted — that *a document which teaches sells a course better than a document which sells one*.

The length agreed was fourteen thousand words. The fee was agreed at the same meeting.

So that is what this is. Every word of it is true. I have not invented one thing in it, I have not improved my rank, I have not made my mother more patient or my father more silent than they were, and the boy two desks over sat exactly like that.

It is an advertisement. Now the other part, and I will be as brief with it as I can, because it is a procedure and procedures do not need to be dressed.

The items are mine. I selected and wrote all forty-nine of them, and nobody has looked at a single one, and nobody will.

I know this building. An editor edits prose. Nobody audits an item — the items are the product, they are the part that makes the thing look like teaching, and checking them is the academic side, and I *am* the academic side. There is no second reader. There has never been a second reader. My father has marked four hundred thousand papers for this company and no human being has read one of them either.

And I know how a boy reads a free booklet from an institute. He does not read the story. *He does the questions*. It is the only thing anybody has trained him to do.

So the prose is for the parents and the items are for the children, and the children are the only ones who will actually answer them.

The run is five hundred thousand. It goes to schools, to institutes, to the registration offices, and to the stairwell of every building on

Karim Khan. It is free. It is everywhere. And it is, formally, exemplary practice material.

There is nothing in any of them that anybody could object to. No slogan. No name. Nothing that is not arithmetically correct. Item forty-seven is Sohrab's, reprinted, with no name on it, under the imprint of the company that stopped giving him work for writing it — and I have not told him that either, and there is no version of this in which I come out of that well.

My rank is made partly out of what was in those bags. That is the second time and it is the last. The file came back on Thursday with two notes in the margin. The first was about a figure. The second said:

the part about your mother — can you make it a bit longer? — K.

So I have made it longer. It is above, at the top of the fourth part, and if you go back to it you will find that it is now four sentences instead of two: the stairwell, the dark, the four minutes, the fact that she was quiet about it and that we could hear her anyway.

It is better. That is the thing I would like somebody to understand. It is not padded and it is not sentimental and it is not a lie. It is simply a better piece of writing than it was on Wednesday, and I made it better on purpose, on a Thursday, for a company, about my mother crying in a stairwell at twenty past one in the morning.

My father has marked papers at night for eleven years at a rate per paper for the institute I now work for. He has subtracted a third, and a third, and a third, four hundred thousand times, and he has never once written down what a blank cost, because there is no box for it on the sheet.

There is no box for it on the sheet.

That is not the same as it costing nothing.

If you don't know, leave it.

I have left it.

GLOSSARY

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

Azar [aa-ZAR] — The ninth month, late November to late December.

Baba [baa-BAA] — Persian, *father*. What the children call him. There is a more formal word and neither of them has ever used it.

Bahman [bah-MAN] — The eleventh month, late January to late February.

Dey [DAY] — The tenth month, late December to late January.

Esfand [es-FAND] — The twelfth and last month, late February to late March.

Farvardin [far-var-DEEN] — The first month, beginning at the spring equinox.

Khānom [KHAA-nom] — Persian, *lady, madam*. What a class calls a woman who teaches it, and what a boy calls his mother in front of thirty-eight other children.

Khob [KHOB] — Persian, *well, good*. Well, then. All right. It closes a subject, agrees to a thing, or accepts what cannot be helped, and in this family it does all three and is never explained.

Khordad [khor-DAAD] — The third month, late May to late June.

Konkoor [kon-KOOR] — Persian from French *concours, a competition*. The national university entrance examination. One paper, four and a half hours, four options to every question. It was introduced in the mid-1340s to stop admissions being decided by who your father knew.

Maman [maa-MAAN] — Persian, *mother*. What the children say. What the adults of that household say is *mādar*, and the difference is about four years and cannot be crossed back.

Mehr [MEHR] — The seventh month, late September to late October. The school year begins on its first day, every year, for everybody.

Mordad [mor-DAAD] — The fifth month, late July to late August; the hottest.

Nowruz [now-ROOZ] — Persian, *new day*. The new year, at the spring equinox. The one week in which a household of this kind spends money it has not got, deliberately, in front of guests.

Ordibehesht [or-dee-be-HESHT] — The second month, late April to late May.

Sampad [sam-PAAD] — Persian, an acronym. The state schools for exceptional talent. Entry is by examination at eleven. They cost nothing, they were built to find a boy in a house with no money in it, and they do — and there are cars at the gate at four o'clock.

Shāhnāmeḥ [shaah-NAA-meh] — Persian, *the book of kings*. The national epic, finished around a thousand years ago. To take a child's name from it rather than from the mosque is a statement about a family, and it is made without a word, and everybody hears it.

Sharbat [shar-BAT] — Persian via Arabic, *a drink*. A cordial of fruit or flowers, kept for guests and for the new year. There is a good one and an ordinary one and everybody at the table knows which is on it.

Tir [TEER] — The fourth month, late June to late July. The examination is held in it.

Toman [to-MAAN] — Persian, *ten thousand*. What money is counted in when people speak, as against the rial it is written in. Ten rials to the toman, and the gap between the two is where a decade of this went.

Mehdi Amini is eighteen. He has slept three hours a night for six hundred nights and answered four hundred thousand practice questions. His father is a physics teacher who marks konkoor papers at night, paid by the paper, for an institute whose course costs more in one month than he earns in four.

The examination has a rule and it is printed on the front. A correct answer scores. A wrong answer takes back part of a correct one. A blank costs nothing at all.

His father's advice is six words and he means it about the test. If you don't know, leave it. He has been taking it himself for twenty-nine years, on a salary worth half of what it costs to keep a household.

Nine hundred and fifty thousand candidates sit down on one morning in Tir. One in ten will be given a place. Two desks from Mehdi, someone finishes the general section, caps a pen, and does not write again for three hours and fifty minutes.

Three wrong answers cancel one right one. Nobody has ever written down what a blank costs.

